University of Alberta

EXPERIENCING THE HIGH-STAKES ENVIRONMENT:

TEACHERS, SOCIAL STUDIES 30 AND THE DIPLOMA EXAMINATION

by

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Abstract

The parallel issues of how social studies teachers experience teaching a class in which an externally mandated examination is required for their students to write along with how external examinations impact teacher pedagogy are the guiding questions of this study. Contextualized in the high-stakes environment of the Social Studies 30 diploma examination program in the province of Alberta, the experiences of four teachers, along with the author's own experience, are explored through narrative to facilitate a clearer understanding of how we experience this pressurized environment.

Acknowledging the varying opinions of what constitutes social studies along with a description of standardized assessment and specifically high-stakes testing provides the foundation on which these experiences are formed. With the study framed as an interpretive inquiry based on philosophic hermeneutics, each participant's narrative emerges, revealing meanings of teaching in a high-stakes environment. My own experience has become an integral part of this understanding and I am fully implicated in the study, along with the other participants. We share similar backgrounds, in that our teaching assignments come from rural settings, which provide opportunity for the voices of those who teach in smaller, often one-person departments to be heard. Our narratives speak to our personal experiences but also provide threads of commonalities which we share with each other and presumably with other Social Studies 30 teachers across the province.

Our stories emerged from a series of individual and group conversations and from these in-depth conversations it is evident that each participant experiences the high-stakes environment of the Social Studies 30 diploma examination course differently which

shapes their own teaching identity. Four themes arose from the conversations which are discussed throughout the narratives and which assist the reader in understanding what it means to prepare students for the diploma examination. These themes include experiencing the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30; the impact the examination has on pedagogy and the resultant curricular impact. Finally, how each teacher organizes Social Studies 30 is explored. The narratives are framed within these themes and provide a picture of how high-stakes standardized assessment affects teachers' pedagogy.

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CHAPTER ONE:
"HOW DID YOU DO IT"?
THE NEXUS BETWEEN DIPLOMA EXAMINATION RESULTS AND PEDAGOGICAL EFFICACY

Alberta is the only province that currently gives standardized tests in social studies... Whatever benefits such tests have in determining student acquisition of basic facts and simple skills, they do not set a standard as to what students should be able to do. They do not define clear expectations, other than to get the highest score possible. They seldom assess complex thinking and behaviours.

(Myers, 2004, p. 290)

I was given a class of struggling students to somehow get through the public exams. I dutifully began covering the textbook topics... The following year I experimented quite freely with the prescribed tenth grade course where there was no public examination.

(Carson, 1984, p. 9)

The net effect for me I think over the years of doing it is pretty strongly positive and the reason for that I think is when I look at the test and the things it tests for, I have no great issue with that. I think these are the things, so many of the things we encounter on the test, are the things you want kids to know, the knowledge, and they are tested for the kinds of skills that you think a well prepared 18 year old should have. To that end I can't really say that there is some kind of big educational compromise when students are exposed to the kind of environment where you know there is a diploma exam that's going to be this type of exam.

(Bill, Conversation 3, 28/7/2004)

Introduction: High-stakes evaluation and social studies

The province of Alberta has maintained a long tradition of including social studies in the required curriculum for all elementary and secondary grades. The province's ministry of education has also stressed the importance of standardized examinations and therefore requires this form of assessment at both the elementary and secondary grade levels. In keeping with this belief and practice, every student who graduates with a high school diploma is required to write a variety of diploma examinations, the standardized examinations at the grade 12 level, in several subjects including social studies.

The emphasis of the Alberta social studies curriculum has been to develop responsible citizens through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that support citizenship. To evaluate whether this aim is achieved throughout the province on a consistent basis, the examination is administered to assess students' acquisition of knowledge and skill components with the belief that if students acquire these portions of the curriculum then the appropriate accompanying attitudes will also result. To achieve this goal curricular outcomes are assessed in both the university entrance as well as the general streams of the social studies program.

Supporters of standardized evaluation in social studies accept diploma examinations as an appropriate measure of curricular requirements. They believe that the examination provides opportunity to demonstrate that the knowledge and various skills which a competent citizen should be expected to have are developed throughout the social studies classes in general and specifically in the Social Studies 30 program. The examination is seen as a validation of an effective curriculum. Some also argue that students and teachers take standardized examinations seriously only if there was something valuable to gain or lose (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

Adherents believe that the standardized nature of the test provides an equitable assessment structure (Nathan, 2002) for all students and provides a reasonable picture of student ability throughout the province. It calls all grade 12 students in Alberta to certain understandings and allows for an addressing of issues that are common to Albertans, Canadians and citizens of the world. Along with this is the notion of maintaining a high level of teaching standards across the province which provides for accountability at the classroom, school and district level. Both students and teachers are held to a certain standard which provides equitable opportunities and recognition for both. The official position of the governmental assessment branch maintains that students who succeed in passing the diploma examinations demonstrate a wide range of skills demanded by the program of studies (Scraba, 1989).

On the other hand, those opposed to standardized tests for social studies argue that many skills which are important for social studies students to develop, such as critical thinking, creative thinking, problem-solving and decision-making become marginalized or eliminated altogether since they may not easily be tested through an examination as much as the knowledge component can be (Alleman & Brophy, 1999; Yell, 1999). These higher-order thinking skills are not as amenable to assessment as the knowledge component is, and therefore are minimalized. They argue that a pencil and paper test, with a multiple-choice component being the major assessment tool, does not adequately measure these skills.

Sceptics also maintain that, as a result of teaching in a high-stakes environment, teachers choose to "teach to the test" and only cover that material which can be included on a standardized examination. Not only are curricular expectations minimalized to material on the test but pedagogical methods also become limited, focusing on those that are most effective to produce high-ranking student results. These arguments suggest that the curricular reductionism implicit in the examinations means that only the material which could possibly be on the test would be taught (Amrein and Berliner, 2003; Neill, 1999).

An accompanying issue is the tendency of teachers to rely heavily on the program of studies and textbooks to transmit knowledge rather than introduce a wide-spectrum of curricular materials which would deepen and broaden student understanding but do not directly appear on the standardized examination. What is mandated in the program of studies is what becomes tested. As a result the Social Studies 30 examination increasingly dictates the curriculum (Richardson, 2002b). An interesting phenomenon arises as a result of this emphasis on test-taking material and skills. Students do not show interest in venturing into any curricular material or learning activities that may not enhance their chances of performing well on the examination. Even if a teacher chooses to explore a topic in depth or employ pedagogical techniques that are effective in other classes, students indicate they want only that which is going to help them on the examination.

My personal experience

"How did you do it"? was the question which solidified my understanding that student performance on the diploma examination is clearly linked to teacher performance in preparing students for the examination. My principal asked the question as we stood in the school hallway one February day during my first year at that school. He was holding the long-awaited set of diploma examination results for our fall semester Social Studies 30 students which I had been waiting anxiously to arrive. Since I was teaching in a small parochial secondary school where I was the only social studies teacher, I felt that these results not only showed the achievement level of my students but also clearly reflected the adequacy of my teaching skills.

Not fully understanding the meaning of the question until later, I responded, "How did I do what"? At that point that he showed me the overall results of the examination with the school mark average falling within one tenth of one percent of the class's examination average and with both these marks being considerably higher than the provincial averages. He was referring to what he considered my ability to prepare the students in an exemplary manner for the diploma examination and he interpreted these scores as evidence that I had performed a job well done.

After further discussion of the results and basking in the affirmation given by the principal, I experienced an epiphanal moment, clearly realizing the strong link between diploma examination results and the perception of pedagogical ability. The better the results, the better the teacher was perceived. At that point I resolved that I would do what was necessary to ensure the students performed to the best of their ability while establishing a solid reputation as a competent teacher. My teaching identity took a turn towards producing superior student results on the standardized examinations to confirm in others' minds that I was not only an adequate teacher but a master at his craft.

During my early teaching career, I taught secondary social studies for several years before I had the opportunity to teach Social Studies 30. Teaching in the environment of high-stakes assessment was a new and interesting experience which I enjoyed. During the first two years I came to appreciate some of the demands that teachers feel as they teach a course like this. The school I was teaching in was very small and being the only Social Studies 30 teacher, I became conscious of the fact that students were not the only ones who experienced the pressures of having to write government mandated examinations. I began to feel that I was constantly being evaluated and that my success or failure as a teacher was entirely dependent on how well the students did on their diploma examinations. I saw this as a challenge and began to hone my content knowledge and pedagogical skills specifically to teach the portions of the curriculum which could be tested on the examination.

After the initial two years, I moved to a larger school and continued to teach the Social Studies 30 course. I felt pride that my teaching practices seemed to be effective, when semester after semester my student's results were significantly higher than the provincial average. I began to assist in marking the essay component of the examinations at the end of each semester along with a host of other Social Studies 30 teachers. I saw this as an excellent professional development opportunity to develop a more complete understanding of examination expectations and to further improve my teaching practice while better equipping my students to write the examinations. One motivation for doing this was to further enable students to achieve their best, and thus situate themselves favourably for university entrance and scholarship possibilities. Another motive was to continue to develop professional competence in the discipline of secondary social studies. Again, my rationale was that if my students were doing exemplary work on the diploma examinations, I must also be performing well as a teacher. Affirmations from students, school administration and parents seemed to support this assumption.

During this time, I also began to work on item-building teams, developing the multiple-choice questions for the examination. I was pleased to be involved with this activity since it afforded further professional development opportunities and provided me with a more intimate knowledge of the examination process itself. I was able to adopt into my teaching practice the skills that I developed by being involved on these teams, and thus was able to further enhance my students' performance on the examination.

Another strategy I used to ensure student academic excellence on the diploma examinations was to tailor my other social studies classes to allow for a teaching of the skills required on the test. I put much effort into preparing the students for the examination. In prerequisite classes at earlier grade levels, I would use multiple-choice test questions modelled on the diploma examination style and I would also emphasize how to write a position paper, which is a significant portion of the examination. Thus, over several semesters, students would develop the skills which enabled them to perform well on the actual diploma examination. The consistent high achievement of the students provided the justification for the emphasizing of these strategies and was a continual affirmation of my teaching identity as I viewed myself as a proficient teacher.

A different perspective

During this time period I sensed a disconnect between how I perceived the mandated examinations and how many other teachers in the same situation viewed them. I maintained a fairly positive attitude about the diploma examination program in social studies, feeling that the examination was an appropriate assessment tool to evaluate the curricular program, a very strict course of study in which both students and teachers could excel if followed closely. I continued to rationalize that, if I carefully "taught to the test", my students would do well and my reputation for being a good teacher would be maintained.

On the other hand, many colleagues I met at the diploma examination essay marking sessions or at the item-building teams were less generous in their praise for the diploma examination program. They saw it as interference in their ability to deliver the curriculum in a meaningful way. As well, they used reasonable arguments regarding high-stakes assessment citing curricular reductionism as a significant problem. Perhaps most significantly, several teachers complained that the examinations had changed their classroom teaching practices in such a way that creativity and exploration were sacrificed in favour of having to carefully include only that material which would be on the examination and omitting "extraneous" material, even though it may be interesting, valuable and supportive of curricular expectations.

Many teachers expressed a significant tension between the external mandate of the examination and that of their own vision of how the Social Studies 30 course should be taught. Those that felt that social studies should be more than an outcome-based curriculum wanted to implement a more socially active pedagogical practice in which both they and the students would be agents of social change. There was a strong sense that social studies should be more than a mere transmission of knowledge and culture but rather an experience for students to develop skills and attitudes which would allow them to become active participants in the society in which they lived rather than mere recipients of the knowledge which the developers of the test had deemed essential. The problem these teachers articulated intimated an impoverished form of pedagogy because of the presence of the diploma examination in the Social Studies 30 program. They believed it required a transmission of knowledge approach and precluded the important component of meaningful active participation.

Arriving at the question

This variance of opinion on the effect of government-mandated examinations sparked my interest in how teachers experience teaching within this high-stakes milieu. This apparent disconnect between my own teaching experience and the experience of others led me to this research project which attempts to provide an understanding of how the Social Studies diploma examination in Alberta affects the teaching practices of teachers who are required to prepare students to write it. The context of high-stakes testing has allowed me to inquire into the lived realities of teachers as they prepare students for these examinations, and has allowed me to also examine the impact of these external evaluation instruments on teaching practice.

The research has provided a clearer understanding of the issues of whether the presence of the diploma examinations in Social Studies 30 hone teaching skills and ensure that the prescribed curriculum is being taught or whether the requirements of examination preparation effectively reduce a teacher's pedagogical practices to a limited focus of examination preparation activities. It has also provided opportunity for apperception and introspection of my own pedagogical practices within the context of high-stakes assessment along with insight on how other teachers situate their own practices. Along with this came a clearer conception of social studies as teachers attempt to reconcile the demands of standardized testing with the socially progressive aims of the curriculum.

The research questions

My research is based on the parallel questions, "how do social studies teachers experience teaching a class in which an externally mandated examination is required for their students to write" along with an inquiry into "how do external examinations impact teacher pedagogy?" These questions are explored in the context of the Alberta diploma examination program in Social Studies 30. In this high-stakes assessment 50% of the students' final mark in the course is determined by their individual results on the diploma examination.

Other concomitant issues investigated in the research project include how teachers organize their diploma examination course differently than other courses they teach in social studies, what methods are used to construct knowledge in a high-stakes testing environment and how they differ from methods used in other classes, which curricular skills and attitudes are emphasized and which are ignored due to the presence of the test, and whether the changes in pedagogy resulting from the influence of the diploma examinations are perceived to be positive or negative by teachers. Along with a consideration of these questions, the concept of teacher identity is explored in relation to classes that have the high-stakes requirements of a standardized examination as compared to those classes that do not have this component.

Conclusion

As I considered the arguments on both sides of the standardized examination issue, I realized that an exploration of my own experience preparing students for the diploma examination in the Social Studies 30 classroom, along with the experiences of others in the same teaching context, would provide a more thorough understanding of what it means to be a social studies teacher in a high-stakes environment. The reality of standardized assessment as an integral part of this program certainly changed my pedagogical approaches in the classroom and I wanted to see if my experience was unique or if it paralleled the experience of other teachers, and what meaning it has for me as well as others.

In Chapter Two I discuss the different approaches and trends within social studies, the rationalization of standardized assessment and high-stakes testing and the effects of this form of evaluation within social studies. The impact on teaching identity is also explored for a fuller understanding of what our experiences mean to our very teaching selves. Chapter Three provides the philosophical underpinnings of the study with a discussion of how hermeneutics allows for an appropriate interpretive inquiry into this field of educational research.

Following Chapter Three are four narratives which illustrate not only how teachers within the high-stakes context of the Social Studies 30 program in the province of Alberta experience this environment but also how their pedagogical methods are impacted by it. Interwoven throughout each narrative I include my own experience to compare with and to further understand how I, as a social studies teacher, was affected by the diploma examination. Within these narratives I believe the reader will develop a more complete conception of what it means to be a teacher in this milieu. A metaphor arising from the notion that teachers construct their own teaching identity along with their unique and personalized curricular and pedagogical approaches is developed and a reflection on the common themes arising from each experience provides a clearer picture of what it means to be a Social Studies 30 teacher.

CHAPTER TWO:
SOCIAL STUDIES, ASSESSMENT AND TEACHER IDENTITY

Introduction

To more fully understand how teachers experience the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination program and its impact on pedagogy, an overview is required of the historical background of social studies along with a survey of the various ideological conceptualizations and the variety of approaches to effective social studies pedagogy. It is also important to review the emphasis on standardization of both curriculum and assessment in general which has resulted in the high-stakes testing environment that is becoming the norm in many jurisdictions. Accompanying this review is an overview of how specifically the discipline of social studies is affected by the emphasis on standardized assessment and how this has influenced and framed change in school climate and teacher identities.

The origins of and approaches to social studies

The origins of social studies have been mired in a "seamless web" of confusion since its inception near the beginning of last century (Barr, Barth & Shermis, 1977; Ross, 2001a, b; Sears, 1997). Traditionalists claim the term first originated in the United States and situate its formal introduction into the secondary curriculum with the publication of the final report of the Committee on Social Studies of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education in 1916. This report, titled *The Social Studies in Secondary Education*, marked the first popular term of "social studies" to refer to the interdisciplinary approach combining history, civics and other social sciences (Vinson & Ross, 2001; Clark, 1997) whose primary purpose was citizenship and the social transmission of historical/cultural information. More recent scholarship questions these origins and asserts that social studies and social science organizations evolved at least three decades earlier with an emphasis on social problems rather than social transmission (Nelson, 2001). Evidence indicates that the term social studies was used in England as early as 1884 (Saxe in Nelson, 2001) and, in Canada, the use of the term social studies was first utilized in curriculum documents in the western provinces in the 1920's and in Ontario in 1937. This is indicative of how other jurisdictions, such as England and especially the United States, have shaped curricula across Canada (Clark, 1997, 2004).

Not only are there controversies over the origins of social studies, the definition and purposes of the discipline engender even greater debate (Nelson, 2001). According to Stanley (2001), social studies remains a field in search of an identity. By definition social studies is an eclectic field which draws on a wide range of disciplines such as history, geography, economics and political science as well as other subject areas within the social sciences and humanities. Ross (2001b) posits that the dispute over the purpose of social studies involves the relative emphasis given to either cultural transmission or to critical or reflective thinking. Cultural transmission emphasizes social adaptation and its emphasis is on teaching content, behaviours and values that reflect views accepted by the traditional, dominant society. When critical thinking is stressed, the intent is to use the social studies curriculum to promote social transformation. The emphasis is on teaching content, behaviours and values that question and critique standard views accepted by society. This approach is a more socially progressive view, valuing diversity and the potential of social action to lead to the reconstruction of culture.

Barr, Barth, & Shermis (1977), in their seminal work *Defining the Social Studies*, identify and describe three separate traditions within social studies that have emerged over the last century. These "Three Traditions" include social studies taught as citizenship transmission, as social science or as reflective inquiry. Teachers who teach social studies as citizenship transmission use content and methods to inculcate society's values. The social science approach emphasizes the knowledge and skills of particular social science disciplines and the development of specific skills within these disciplines. Reflective inquiry emphasizes decision-making skills and inquiry methods which help students understand and become involved in the complexities of everyday living.

Osborne (2004) also presents a triad of conceptions regarding social studies. First, the term is used as a mere administrative categorization used to describe courses such as history, geography and perhaps other courses such as economics and sociology, but all taught as separate disciplines. A second conception uses the term social studies to describe "the social sciences simplified for pedagogical purposes" (p. 73), usually presented in an integrated fashion and organized thematically. The third concept of social studies is that of it being an interdisciplinary subject in its own right, which is an integrated study of social sciences and humanities with the purpose of promoting civic competence.

Other curricular approaches include subject-centred social studies which derives its content and purposes from disciplines taught in higher education. For proponents of this approach, subject matter knowledge is paramount (Sears, 1997). Civic-centred social studies is concerned with individual and social attitudes and behaviours more than with subject matter knowledge. Citizenship or civic competence is the ability and responsibility to interpret, understand and act effectively as a member of one's society, and is the unifying theme in this approach (Osborne, 1997a, b). Issues-centred approaches assert that social studies is the study of specific issues or that it might be built around social realities and ethical questions and the possibilities they raise (Evans, 2001; Cherryholmes, 1996; Evans & Brodkey, 1996; Pugh & Garcia, 1996). Through the study of current, relevant issues, it is expected that students will engage themselves in the discourse of the world of which they are a part to help resolve significant social, civic and personal problems. Issues which deal with moral dilemmas or values clarification are the primary content of the curriculum with some advocates arguing that social criticism or activism is the foremost reason for studying issues. Others view this approach as a way to enable students to adapt to society. Social studies offers the opportunity to struggle personally with an issue and develop explanations about who we are, why we are, along with how to address issues of equality, inhumanity, discrimination and justice (Nowicki & Meehan, 1996). These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive or antagonistic. In fact, elements of each may be found in most social studies curricula (Ross, 2001b).

Action vs. transmission

In relation to social studies curricula and pedagogy, teachers may position themselves at various locations on a spectrum, with its polar ends ranging between active involvement with emphasis on social change on one end, and transmission of knowledge which supports social acceptance on the other (Clark & Case, 1997). Where a teacher places himself or herself is based on their epistemological stance as well as their political and educational philosophy (Nelson, 2001). Deeply embedded western beliefs about the nature of knowledge as being a body of human wisdom accumulated and tempered over time that must be passed on from one generation to the next are the distinguishing features of education for more than a century (Cuban, 1993). Social studies has reflected this traditional stance of transmission through a history-dominated curriculum; but, more recently, there has been a movement toward social activism within the social studies. In contrast to the traditional transmission approach, a new emphasis on active involvement through enlightened political engagement has arisen (Parker, 2001). There has also been an encouragement of mediated action based on the epistemic assumption that one learns as one does while engaged in goal-directed activity (Levstik & Barton, 2001).

In addition to the transmission vs. action spectrum and to further facilitate an understanding of one's own practice, it is useful for teachers to think about social studies as representing a continuum comparing the degree to which curricula emphasize either content or process. (Richardson, personal communication, January 23, 2003). Again, an orientation towards either end of the spectrum depends on a teacher's philosophy and understanding of the construction of knowledge. If these theoretical spectrums were merged at right angles to each other, creating four quadrants, individuals can graphically place where they stand in relation to these approaches to social studies.

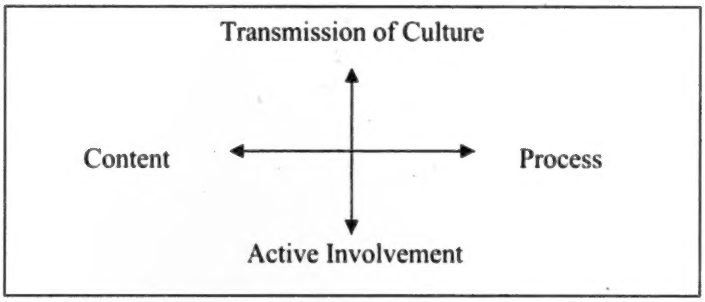

Figure 1 – A spectrum of social studies pedagogical possibilities

Citizenship education

In North America, the school subject which has been most clearly given the responsibility of educating for citizenship has been the discipline of social studies (Sears, 2004). There is considerable agreement that the purpose of social studies is civic competence or the preparation for citizenship, but that is where the accord ends. Citizenship is a contested concept meaning very different things to different people. At one end of the continuum, citizenship is seen in passive terms where the goal for citizens is loyalty to the state and its institutions, a sharing of common cultural values and obedience to law.

Axelrod (1997) indicates that this conceptualization was developed over a century ago as the middle class grew with a belief emerging that a prosperous and productive society required a population that was orderly, loyal and respectful of the growing authority of the state. Political elites were to make decisions on complex public issues on behalf of the ordinary citizens. Appropriate citizen action consisted of keeping informed and voting in elections, and schools became institutional missionaries, serving society by cultivating appropriate citizenship attitudes among students. Conversely, at the other end of the citizenship spectrum, there are those that envision active, participatory democracy. Individual citizens are considered the best judges of their own interests and so governing is seen as the task of all citizens. A much more egalitarian and democratic approach to citizenship is urged. There are any number of possible interpretations of citizenship between these two extremes (Sears, 1997).

Over the last century, various rationales have been offered for situating citizenship education within social studies. For some scholars (Clark & Case, 1997; Case 1997b) these rationales represent four dominant traditions. First, citizenship education is considered as social initiation or the transmitting of understandings, abilities and values that students will require to be productive members of society. The second classification is that of social reformation which empowers students with the understandings, abilities and values necessary to improve or transform society. The third classification, social studies as personal development, fully cultivates students as individuals and social beings, which fosters the personal talents and character of each student. The last classification, academic understanding, introduces students to the bodies of knowledge and forms of inquiry represented in the various social science disciplines to help understand them better.

Another approach is Parker's (2001) taxonomy which mirrors Barr, Barth & Shermis' (1977) "Three Traditions" within social studies, and utilizes the same categories to describe the traditions of citizenship education: citizenship transmission, social science and reflective inquiry. The first affirms existing political institutions and ideals while the latter two are reform initiatives which endeavour to replace the transmission model. Avery et al. (1996) suggest two goals for citizenship education which include the ability to analyze significant social and political issues and the need for students to become familiar with a repertoire of strategies for meaningful participation in the democratic process. Chamberlain and Glassford (1997) present the binary of passive knower versus active doer as the possible approaches to citizenship education. Osborne (1997a) sees this binary as occurring along conservative and liberal lines where the former emphasizes performing duties, fulfilling responsibilities and respecting tradition with the latter viewing citizenship education as the expression of inalienable and inviolable rights. Houser and Kuzmic (2001) call for the notion of ethical citizenship education, based on the assumption that citizens are informed by moral principles concerning human conduct.

Historically, citizenship education was exclusionary in that it was used to justify attempts to eradicate minority traditions that were seen by the dominant group in society as inconsistent with their vision of citizenship (Osborne, 1997a). Examples can be found in the suppression of First Nations' cultures, and in denying basic rights to ethnic groups such as the Japanese during the Second World War. More recently, this exclusionary approach to gender has also been questioned. Bernard-Powers (2001) notes that gender bias is part of the fabric of our society and, as such, is a critical dimension of the citizenship education curriculum. She poses the challenge of achieving gender equitable and gender fair social studies with the ultimate goal of curriculum transformation (Bernard-Powers, 1995). In the last decade, many scholars have called for the abolition of the remaining patterns of gender-based social inequality and marginalization of women within citizenship education and have pushed for recognition of gender equality and curricular inclusivity (Loutzenheiser, 2004; Nelson, Palonsky & McCarthy, 2004; Noddings, 2001; Tupper, 2002; Turner & Clark, 1997).

History and geography in social studies

History has been the dominant subject studied in the social studies and the history establishment is seen as its parent-guardian. Many historians feel that social studies owes its beginnings and academic substance to history and that the responsibility of social studies is essentially the uncritical transmission of historical information (Nelson, 2001). Whelan (2001) supports history as the core of social studies and argues that the present is a product of the past and knowledge of the past enlightens the present. Thus, the locus of inquiry of social studies should be the complex relationship between the past and the present. He also posits that the purpose of "history is not 'knowing' at all, but interpreting, a much more profound and intellectual challenge" (p. 46).

To place the debate of history within the social studies in the Canadian context, Bliss (2002) calls for a healthy foundation of historical understanding in the social studies which includes new approaches to and serious discussions of the issues swirling around the old content. He maintains that a core history content ought to be taught and that literate citizens are best prepared through teaching students a balanced overview of Canadian history. Osborne (1997b) continues this theme and argues for the inclusion of history in the social studies as an important contributor to the practice of democratic citizenship. From the perspective of its advocates, history makes students aware of the range of human behaviour and thus teaches what it means to be human. It also provides a context for contemporary phenomenon, and a nexus of those events which have preceded this generation to those that will succeed it.

In addition, history also connects students to the long struggle for improvements in the human condition as well as providing a stock of knowledge with which to evaluate current events. Seixas (2002, 2004) calls for social studies to be a critical historical discourse in which students are provided guided opportunities to confront conflicting accounts, various meanings and multiple interpretations of the past. This approach, he asserts, is the best insurance against dogmatic transmission of a single version of the past. In this same vein, Ferguson (1996) calls for the teaching of issues-centred history based on a model of analogical reasoning which employs a problem-solving paradigm with distinctive modes of historical inquiry.

Geography, as a content area, has also traditionally been included in the social studies. Hurren (2004), and Deir (1997) assert that geography is an essential element because it supplies an understanding of our earth, its interdependent systems, and diversity of people which allow students to make wise decisions about the use of the earth. Wright (1997b) provides rationales for the inclusion of geography in the social studies, also. Its intrinsic value is evidenced in the study of the geography of places which appeals to the human spirit. Personal decision-making is also enhanced through gaining a broader view of the world. Social decision-making is fostered through a study of the global consequences of our actions and in helping students confront and try to resolve social issues which affect their communities, country and world.

The National Geographic Research and Exploration (1994) project calls for geography to be a process of lifelong learning through the setting of geography into life contexts such as school, family, society and occupation. Writing from a postmodernist view, Hurren (2000) considers geography as geo-graphy or earth writing or writing of the world where "we write ourselves into the world" (p. 43) which provides the opportunity for inclusiveness or the idea that social studies is about including all people and places in the conception of the world and how people live in it.

Other curricular movements and trends within social studies

Several other areas have been added to the social studies curriculum over time. One of the foremost is multicultural education which incorporates an examination of ethno-cultural differences and promotes understanding and social harmony in schools (Friesen, 1997; Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; Kehoe, 1997) and provides for a common public forum for the discussion of divergent historical views and experiences (Seixas, 1997; Steinhauer, 1997). Araboglou (1996) believes that multicultural education creates an environment for cognitive understandings and empathetic feelings to evolve in both mainstream and minority groups. Hursh (2001) asserts that the goal for multicultural education needs to be more than this. Because social inequality and disparity is a consequence of race, diversity, gender, and class, multicultural education must be broadened to include these characteristics, also. Thus multicultural pedagogy is about altering the actual character of the mainstream of society (Varma-Joshi, 2004).

A specific cultural group that has experienced exclusion in the social studies curriculum until recently have been Aboriginal groups such as the First Nations in Canada. Orr (2004) believes that a distinctive Aboriginal worldview and perspective on social studies issues enriches all social studies classes because it creates rich opportunities for exploring multiple perspectives and values and thus must be an integral part of any social studies program. Santora (2001) also supports this notion for all subjugated minority groups. "Multicultural education should focus on transforming dominant beliefs, values, assumptions, and experiences in ways that will support collective and public action to improve the education and living conditions for all subordinated groups" (p. 151).

Another recent curricular movement closely linked to multicultural education is global education, which develops from a desire to explore the interconnectedness of the world and the complexity of its peoples, the lived experiences of people different than oneself, and the perceptual skills in perspective consciousness, along with open-mindedness, and resistance to chauvinism and stereotyping (Merryfield & Subedi, 2001; Werner & Case, 1987). Pike & Selby (2000) highlight the link between global education and citizenship and the inherent rights and responsibilities for all citizens. Two dimensions of a global perspective are developed by Case (1987) – a substantive dimension and a perceptual dimension. The former is the object of study such as world events, states of affairs, places and things while the latter includes the point of view or lens through which to view the world as more than just an accumulation of knowledge about the world. Some global education theorists believe that it should not be considered a discrete component of the social studies curriculum, but rather an orientation to the study of the world with a cross-curricular emphasis (Merryfield, 2001; McClaren, 1997).

Peace education has also become a component of social studies. Carson & Lange (1997) indicate that peace education was founded on the promotion of international understanding and dispute arbitration near the turn of last century. It has changed over the ensuing decades but social justice has remained a prominent component. Current definitions would also include the dimensions of non-violence, human rights, global literacy, ecological balance, personal peace, meaningful participation and conflict resolution (Bickmore, 2004). Interestingly, even with the laudible goal of peace, the inclusion of peace education within the social studies has not been without controversy. Detractors claim that it promotes peace through propaganda and indoctrination (Hargraves, 1997).

While peace education gained saliency during the last several decades of the 20th century, more recently social studies theorists have turned their attention to the problematic of globalization. Since the end of the Cold War, the world is grappling with a phenomenon that has produced such an immense impact in just a few years that we are facing a new historical epoch and configuration of a new world system (Burbules & Torres, 2000). The global forces of the world markets of capital goods, services and information are currently transforming the world system of nation states (Green, 1997) into a borderless world where globalization has become a planetary unified global trading network operating according to a common set of rules (Smith, 2000). In fact, these globalization trends have become so dominant that the former notions of international trade and interrelations within a global economy by separate nation-states have given way to the reality of the all-encompassing or totalizing ideology where the "market is the only factor to consider in structuring our lives and our institutions" (Currie & Newson, 1998, p. 9). These globalizing economic forces have important consequences for all educators but especially for those involved in social studies education (Richardson, 2004).

The educational system and the discipline of social studies, in particular, has also been the site for the formation of national identity (Richardson, 2002a; 2002b). Linked with citizenship, there has been a move away from the traditional emphasis on teaching a single national identity to one that is more inclusive and diverse and which recognizes the fluidity and complexity of a pluralistic society. Richardson (2002a) argues that social studies curriculum should recognize

> the open-ended and ambiguous process of national identity formation in diverse societies" rather than restrict the study of national identity "to particular acts of cultural redemption and preservation (p. 14).

A push for law education to become an integral part of the social studies curriculum has gained momentum recently. Law educators assert that social studies cannot be adequately taught without attention to law and its attendant issues which include the intertwining study of issues such as the nature of citizenship, people's rights and responsibilities, social justice issues, personal and citizen empowerment, a study of the values and beliefs that undergird our democracy, environmental issues, planning decisions, historical events, conflict resolution, and world order (Cassidy, 2004).

Social studies curricula and pedagogical approaches have also been natural sites to include process skills such as critical thinking (Evans & Hundey, 2004; Wright, 1997a), inquiry (Fowler, 1997), concept learning (Hughes, 2004), cooperative learning (Myers, 1997b) and situated learning (Hughes & Sears, 2004). Technology and its application vis-à-vis social studies is also a current issue (Gibson, 2004). The introduction of the use of technology in the social studies classroom includes providing information, the development of knowledge and skills, and links to resources and locations (Berson, Lee & Stuckart, 2001) but also presents significant challenges (Smits, 2001a; Diem, 2000; Gibson, 1997).

Shaver (2001) takes a critical look at research in the social studies. He notes the poor quality of research in this area and the lack of impact on curriculum and instruction. The positivist approach, employing quantitative measures through the scientific method in an attempt to measure and assess the social sciences, is problematic and has not always yielded relevant results, but he considers the emergence of qualitative research in this area encouraging. This emerging research lends itself better to a study of a human science such as social studies. He claims that the cacophony of epistemologies in social studies research reflects a field without a clear image of itself, which results in intellectual conflict, confusion and uncertainty.

Assessment & standardization

Assessment has traditionally been an integral part of the educational process based on several rationalizations developed over time. Some of its earliest modern roots were seen in Napoleonic France with an attempt at standardization of schooling and assessment with the institution of "Baccalaureate" examinations. This emphasis continued and we see that, even a century ago, a justification for standardized testing was that examinations were indispensable for encouraging adolescents to commit to a serious and sustained effort. When there was an examination placed ahead of them, pupils and teachers could no longer behave in an easy and casual way, with allowances made for good intentions, individual temperaments, passing indispositions or changing seasons. Pupils would pay more attention to their work and teachers would make their lessons more accurate and concise when faced with mandatory examinations (Luijten, 1991). This view was partially based on the notion that encouragement and reward of individual efforts would be difficult if evaluation did not exist. Excellence would be less demonstrable and decisions on curriculum and methods would be based on prejudice and caprice rather than solid evidence (Linn & Gronlund, 2000).

Standardized educational evaluation was furthered by the ubiquitous measurement movement which gained momentum with the coming of the First World War and, for the next half century or more, the purposes of evaluation were several and varied. Guba and Lincoln (1981) record that, for most of the last century, the function of evaluation was to document events, record student change, aid in decision-making, seek understanding and facilitate remediation and that the purpose needed to be determined by the needs of different audiences. Over time, many educationists have defined the purposes of evaluation. Its goal was to aid educators in their tasks of classroom planning, improve teaching and learning situations, provide feedback, and ascertain if a standard had been reached. Other purposes included selecting a given number of candidates for certain reasons, testing the efficiency of teaching; indicating the progress of student's present and future performance, and sampling performances of which the student was capable. (Buckman, 1988; Payne, 1997; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2001; Scriven, 1980; Thyne, 1974).

Many curricular areas have witnessed an increased standardization of both curriculum and assessment with social studies being no exception. While the phenomenon of using student performance on tests for accountability purposes is not new, its pervasive character has not been observed before to the extent found in the current educational environment. Some argue that serious problems are evident when high-stakes assessment is required, especially in areas like social studies (Alleman & Brophy, 1999). These include curricular reductionism and the inability to assess vital elements of the social studies program such as complex thinking and behaviours as well as the ineffectiveness in providing the teacher with information for making effective and timely instructional decisions (Myers, 2004) regarding the students being tested. Others argue that large-scale externally mandated assessment helps focus student and teacher attention on what should be learned and thus argue that standardized testing enhances learning (Parker, 1996).

An additional rationalization for the increased emphasis on standardized assessment is that it provides a comparison to other students, teachers, schools and nations. The public demand for these external examinations indicates a desire for assurance of common standards and a perceived fairness of comparison between schools (Black, 1991). Across North America, several states and provinces have adopted policies that call for "grading" individual schools on the basis of students' high-stakes test scores (Popham, 2001) because test scores seem to be accepted as a sufficient criterion of effective education (Jones, 2001). This comparison provides a measurement of which schools are doing a better job at educating their students. This phenomenon is then translated into national comparisons where international standards for learning are benchmarks used by national leaders to measure the progress of their students against world standards (Spring, 1998). It is interesting to note that, on a personal level, teachers find that their viewpoints of students change as they attempt to meet the external standards.

> As I teach from day to day, the new expectations from the standards movement are forcing a change in my perceptions. I hate to admit it, but I no longer see the students the way I once did -- certainly not in the same exuberant light as when I first started teaching five years ago. Where once there were "challenging" or "marginal" students, I am now beginning to see liabilities. Where once there was a student of "limited promise," there is now an inescapable deficit that all available efforts will only nominally affect (Hixon, 2000, n.p.).

Accountability is another significant factor for increased standardization in assessment. Examinations have served to place teachers under continued monitoring and surveillance by administrators, superintendents and parents who equate "public accountability" of what teachers do with performance on standardized examinations (Cheng & Couture, 2000). A troubling element of this emphasis on public accountability is that, in many instances, schools which perform poorly on these tests may actually have been doing a superlative instructional job, but their efforts are not reflected by the students' scores (Popham, 2001). This can lead to improper conclusions about the effectiveness of teachers due to faulty generalizations based of these results.

Over the last two decades an increasing number of assessment programs have been dedicated to providing external accounts of student learning due to the perceived need of educational reform focusing on achievement. Legislators, other decision makers and educational stake-holders, along with the public, parents, and even to some extent teachers and administrators, seem to believe that test results will clearly inform them about students' achievement. Many of these people are sophisticated enough to know that tests cannot cover all that is important in schooling or in cognitive learning, however they appear to trust that a particular score reflects what students are able to achieve – and not simply what they are willing to demonstrate (Herman, 1991).

Driven largely by political and economic forces such as neo-liberalism which emphasizes economic rationality and efficiency and neo-conservatism which supports government control in areas such curriculum and assessment (Apple, 2003, 2001), local, provincial, state and national authorities in North America have demanded reports of student achievement in key areas. These typically include the subjects of math, language arts, science and social studies (Wilson, 1999). Accompanying a demand for increased academic accountability in these subject areas is the call for improved educational achievement which appears in two forms; that of standardized testing and a standardized curriculum that provides the basis for the assessment.

Several assumptions about tests undergird the ideological structures of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. First, tests are seen as a legitimate means of making distinctions among people on the basis of who passes and who fails; so, test scores become predictors about people and their futures. Another assumption is that, if test scores rise, students must be learning more and therefore moving closer to excellence. A corollary of this notion is that schools are seen as doing a better job of educating the students because test scores are seen as effective reflectors of education. In the context of the neo-liberal value placed on competition, students are ranked according to how they perform on the tests. Teachers are also evaluated on pedagogical efficacy because test scores are seen as indicators of quality instruction. This pressure on teachers may lead them to be less inclined to pursue their own agendas and more inclined to perform in terms of this assessment criteria (Polster & Newson, 1998). Additionally, the rankings of school results are viewed by some as a confining and restrictive influence on the ways teachers have taught (Popham, 2001). As a result, creativity and meeting students' individual needs are sacrificed to meet the demands of the testing culture.

There are several other assumptions upon which standards-based curriculum and assessment are founded, such as an expectation of higher achievement, increased competitiveness, the provision of equalized educational opportunity and centralized accountability (Mathison, Ross & Vinson, 2001). Renewed emphasis on standardization and assessment also reveals this movement's epistemological underpinnings. A demand for more standardization of the curriculum and standardized testing promotes a particular and singular view of truth, knowledge and learning (Ross, 1999).

Placing this in a local context, Tupper (2002) posits that another way that the individualist neo-liberal ideology of citizenship is manifest is through the diploma examinations administered to grade 12 students in the province of Alberta. If the actions of citizenship are informed by self-interest, then these examinations lead to this understanding. A competitive individualist culture is sustained as students prepare to write diploma examinations and establish the norms of success, which ranks the students and disadvantages those who have less ability in writing these forms of high-stake examinations. Thus, the success of some students depends on the failure of others. This neo-liberal ideology has the potential of widening social inequalities and some maintain that the diploma examination program can be seen as complicit in enabling this gap to continue to grow.

With the ubiquitous call for educational reform, the promise of assessment as a tool to achieve this goal is seen in the potential of influencing educators' behaviour. Externally mandated assessments have the power to attract and focus the attention and efforts of both teachers and students. The basic notion is that "you get what you assess and you do not get what you do not assess" (Parker, 1996; Resnick & Resnick, 1992). Other more unfortunate results are evidenced in the lived realities of the teachers faced with these assessment methods. In a survey of teachers who faced not only administering the examinations but also having the results being published, Lee-Smith (1991) presents data which indicated that test anxiety was not restricted to students but also included teachers. These teachers believed that scores are used against them resulting in a strict adherence to the components of the curriculum which are testable, disallowing adaptation or creativity.

Many teachers also believe that locally developed curricula and individually crafted pedagogy will be destroyed through the implementation of mandated standardized tests (Nelson, Palonsky & McCarthy, 2004). The pressure of test-driven reforms also have a negative effect on teachers' motivation which robs them of their professional capacity to choose curricular content, to respond in meaningful ways to particular student needs and to set an appropriate instructional pace (Urdan & Paris in Mathison, 2001).

Ross (1999) asserts that "the massive testing scheme forces teachers to throw their curriculum plans out the window in order to focus on test preparation and teach bits of information students must memorize for the exam" (p. 127). Programs of student testing greatly influence what is taught. In many schools, external tests establish subject-matter priorities even if that function is not intended. The school curriculum is at times reduced to instruction that matches the content of the standardized tests or other external assessment procedures and instruction is derailed to "prepare" students for standardized tests (Stodolsky, 1988).

High-stakes testing

From within this milieu of an increased testing emphasis, there arises a further attempt to achieve improved results and increased accountability. The majority of states in the United States of America and several Canadian provinces, including Alberta, mandate examinations which link student performance on the examinations to promotion, graduation, qualifications for scholarships or other measurements of success or accountability. Measures have been implemented as a result of these "high-stakes" tests such as grade level retention or required summer school for students. A number of jurisdictions have also raised the stakes for the teachers and schools by tying to the results of the tests such things as pay increases, budget cuts or publication of school rankings in newspapers (Heubert & Hauser, 1999, Sheppard, 2003,). While some of these issues are more prevalent in the United States context, many of these same problems exist in Canada and other countries as well (Lyman, 1998).

Supporters of high-stakes testing argue that these examinations force students, parents, teachers and school administration to take education seriously. The public ranking of schools and districts expose those students and teachers who fail to do this. High-stakes tests require a clear standardized curriculum so that all students are taught the same material and then administered the same test. Thus, it is believed that the inequities in students' opportunity to learn would finally be eradicated (Nathan, 2002). Advocates also argue that anyone who opposes this form of testing is an apologist for a broken system of education. They claim that a good test is aligned with the curriculum so that the schools know whether children are actually learning the material they are supposed to know (Semas, 2001). Assessment is seen as critical to making schools accountable and to identifying practices that make schools and teachers successful. The whole point of assessment is that it provides a rich data source that can be used to help individual children and identify where teachers' strengths and weaknesses lie (Sclafani 2002).

Conversely, critics argue that high-stakes testing creates problems greater than the benefits accrued through this form of assessment. For example, Linn, (2000, p. 15) notes that

> Assessment systems that are useful monitors lose much of their dependability and credibility…when high-stakes are attached to them. The unintended negative effects of high-stakes accountability uses often outweigh the intended positive effects.

Amrein & Berliner (2003) claim that high-stakes testing has deleterious effects on both students and teachers. A decrease in student motivation, a reduction in critical thinking skills and an alienation of students from their own learning experiences have resulted in higher student grade level retention and dropout rates. The adverse effects on teachers include a narrowing and shifting of curricular emphasis to material included on the test and even a corruption of ethics, where school administrators and teachers have been caught "revising" students answers before they were marked.

Other effects these tests have on teachers include the fact that teachers are often distracted from a thoughtful consideration of students and unable to appreciate their individual gifts. When a teacher's primary focus is on tests and test-taking strategies, reflective attention to individual potential is difficult to sustain (Donlevy, 2000). Along with this, many quality educators are leaving the field of education because of the intense pressures placed upon them. Widely-divergent results between one group of students to another are common occurrences, even though they have had the same teacher, curriculum and pedagogical methods, but parents and the public hold the teacher and school responsible for results that are less than exemplary.

Kohn (1999, 2000a, 2000b) presents a challenge to supporters of high-stakes standardized testing with a plethora of arguments in opposition to the current maelstrom of examinations. He contends that students in North America are tested at an unprecedented rate and that the variances in test scores have a higher correlation to non-instructional factors, such as the number of parents living at home, parental educational background, type of community and poverty rate, than to instructional performance. He argues further that these tests often measure superficial thinking and ignore the most important characteristics of a good learner since standardized tests cannot measure initiative, creativity, effort, irony, judgement, good will, ethical reflection and a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes. Students care only if they get the right answer rather than how they got it. Wide-range and enthusiastic exploration of ideas that once characterized classrooms can no longer survive when the emphasis is on preparation for these examinations.

Rejecting the argument that these tests provide equity and fairness for students, Kohn (2002) further contends that high-stakes testing marks a major retreat from fairness, accuracy, and quality. Tests may be biased because they require a set of skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. The wealthier can also afford test preparation courses that the poorer segments of society cannot access and thus a greater disparity is created and fairness and equity become a hollow promise.

Ollman (2003) criticizes the increased emphasis on assessment, and attempts to disabuse a number of perceived "myths" surrounding examination. The first myth is that examinations are a necessary part of education. He claims that requiring frequent examinations is a very recent innovation. A second myth he attempts to debunk is that examinations are unbiased, suggesting that it is impossible to produce a test that does not have serious biases. Other myths that he attempts to expose include the objectivity of grading, that examinations are an accurate indication of what students know, that all students have an equal chance to do well on examinations, and that examinations are necessary to motivate students to do their work.

Sacks (1999) and Sheppard (2002) state that teaching to the test and curricular distortion resulting from this narrow emphasis have become the unfortunate results of a high-stakes testing accountability program. They cite studies which indicate that the majority of teachers, who felt pressure to increase high-stake test scores, would drill their students on item types that they knew would be on the test with an overabundance of teaching to the test's content and format. This results in a "dumbing-down" effect which occurs when teachers teach to the test and largely make it their entire focus of attention. As a consequence, "the very nature of learning, as an open-ended, somewhat uncertain, spontaneous, creative, and complex process, is turned upside down" (Sacks, 1999, p. 130). This "dumbing down" effect that, ironically, advocates for high-stakes testing decry is evidence for more accountability is actually exacerbated by the emphasis on test taking to the exclusion of other types of learning. Learning in such an environment is fragmented into bite-sized pieces, devoid of meaning or connection to a reality beyond the abstraction of an atomistic test item. A holistic approach to teaching is lost as the emphasis is removed from the complex whole to focus on the parts of the whole.

To illustrate this effect in an actual educational context, an interesting research study was conducted in the province of British Columbia shortly after government-mandated examinations were reintroduced in the twelfth-grade, following a decade-long hiatus. Researchers O'Shea and Wideen (in Sacks, 1993) describe their study of the effects of large-scale testing in which they observed the behaviours of both students and teachers in eighth-, tenth-, and twelfth-grade classrooms to see if this behaviour changed in the classrooms where provincially mandated examinations were administered. The results of their study confirmed their suspicion, as they observed that teachers in the classes in which the examination was required were far less likely to engage students in multifaceted approaches to learning. The non-tested classes experienced a much more vibrant pedagogy than was observed in the grade 12 classes. Subjects were explored in much greater depth. The effect of the testing was seen to have a very strong impact on teaching.

Another study which mirrors these findings was conducted by McMillan, Myran and Workman (1999). Their investigation of teachers who were required to administer mandated tests noted changed instructional practices that included what content was taught and how it was taught along with differences in classroom assessment. Teachers indicated that the examinations increased the structure of their presentations with a resulting loss of curricular flexibility. Although the test did attempt to assess higher-order thinking skills such as problem solving, creative and critical thinking processes, ultimately teaching for understanding was a casualty. Instead teaching practice was reduced to those skills which would appear on the test. The study concludes that there was a dramatic shift in the professional dimension of teaching that is important to attracting and maintaining qualified professionals. The studies cited above suggest that the teacher's role may be shifting from that of a relatively autonomous, independent, creative professional, to a more mechanical and mundane model in which teachers are little more than dispensers of knowledge. The spectre of decreased autonomy and pedagogical freedom may have larger implications as the profession of teaching may become less appealing for current practitioners as well as for future prospects.

Assessment and social studies

If high-stakes testing has had a significant impact on teaching practices, it has had an equal if not greater impact on the content of social studies. One of the ways high-stakes testing has made itself felt is through an increased emphasis on standardized curricula. For example, in the United States between 1994 and 1997, five separate sets of national standards were published for social studies, civics and government, history, geography, and economics. Those who support the adoption of these national standards point to the importance of externally-written evaluation instruments based on a core set of knowledge and skills, and designed to shape instructional practice and assessment instruments (Buckles, Schug & Watts, 2001).

While attempts have been made in regions of Canada at standardizing the social studies curriculum, such as the Western Canada Protocol, these efforts have not been as successful (Richardson, 2002a). This has not lessened the emphasis on externally-mandated examinations as is evidenced in the province of Alberta, which is the only jurisdiction in Canada to require provincially standardized assessment in social studies at the grade 12 level with the exception of some other provinces requiring exit examinations in more discipline-based courses such as history (Sears, 2004; Shields and Ramsay, 2004). Curriculum branches within the departments of education work hand-in-hand with colleagues in the evaluation departments to design curriculum which is amenable to large-scale assessment. (G. Richardson, personal communication, November 18, 2003).

Given the prevalence of mandated testing in North America, an ideological conceptualization of social studies vis-à-vis assessment is valuable in understanding how this content area is impacted by high-stakes testing. Gaudelli (2002) presents four differing views of traditions within social studies: perennialism, essentialism, constructivism and multiculturalism. Perennialists contend that there is an organized body of knowledge that students need to know so society might cohere around a common identity. History is the fundamental element of an exemplary social studies program and recognition of the "master narrative" is essential. Standardized tests are viewed as the method to see if students are being taught this information correctly and poor tests results are often used to attempt to illustrate that teachers are failing to pass this cultural heritage on to students.

Essentialists argue that core knowledge and skills are vital to a successful society, because these requisite abilities allow the individual to be an economically productive member of society. The learning of basic skills is seen as essential and the skills taught in history and other social studies content areas are seen as useful only if they are transferable to the workplace. Assessment is the important indicator which reveals whether these skills are being mastered. The tests are touchstones which indicate the efficacy of the instruction, and if the skills are not being taught, as indicated by the examination results, it proves the need to return to a "back to the basics" approach where these primary skills are taught.

The other two viewpoints perceive the social studies curriculum and role of assessment in a significantly different way. Constructivists see education as child-centred. The curriculum must connect to the student's lived experience and the proponents charge that social studies has been reduced to a mindless heap of information which must be absorbed and then regurgitated on the tests. Poor test results indicate that the social studies curriculum has no relevance in the lives of students and it is the curriculum that must be transformed to meet the needs and interests of the students.

The multiculturalist hypothesis, largely based on critical theory, posits that the social studies curriculum has under-emphasized and distorted the contributions of historically oppressed groups for too long and emphasizes the need for social justice. Adherents see standardized examinations as a function of cultural reproduction and the only real value of these forms of assessment is that the results of the tests are considered proof that equity has not been achieved and that diversity and equality needs to be infused throughout the social studies curriculum.

This ideological base provides a more complete understanding of the contrasting arguments regarding standardized assessment in social studies. Those who believe social studies to be the site of transmission of culture and content knowledge would favour standardized testing more than those who view social studies as transformational and the site for the development of processes and skills which lead to civic competence. The examinations confirm that the knowledge component has been passed on and received by students while a transformational approach is less amendable to this type of testing. Advocates for testing who speak from either the perennialist or essentialist positions would argue that the tests have been constructed to reflect the objectives of the program of studies in social studies (Belyk, 1992) and thereby support the learning of these curricular outcomes.

O'Brien (1997) states that these forms of assessment provide a relevant and comprehensive evaluation of achievement. They not only focus on the curricular objectives, but can also assess higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking and multidisciplinary achievement, along with serving as an effective instructional technique. Some proponents contend that standardized assessments would improve the status of social studies in education, since these tests would force school administrators to ensure social studies remains an integral part of every school's curriculum (Brousseau, 1999). Others argue that mandated testing keeps teachers on task with the appropriate objectives and provides necessary guidelines to ensure productive teaching is occurring. Supporters also assert that mandated tests enhance learning by providing an incentive to learning through the teaching of core knowledge and skills (Burroughs, 2002).

Critics of standardized assessment in social studies, such as proponents of the constructivist or multicultural perspectives, claim that tests have failed to measure students' awareness of major social studies understandings, appreciations, life applications and higher order thinking skills (Alleman & Brophy, 1999). The argument continues that, in life, performance is not a matter of how well one fills in blanks or selects correct answers to multiple-choice questions. Rather, a person is judged on what he or she can do with the attitudes, values and intellectual skills inherent in the social studies curricula such as decision-making, solving problems, critical thinking, separating fact from opinion, and the important task of getting along with other people. In the real world, people work in groups, not to memorize facts, but to gather, evaluate and use knowledge and skills to solve problems. Full assessment goes far beyond the narrow view of standardized testing (Biemer, 1993). Levstik & Barton (2001) suggest that performance on a standardized test is irrelevant to students' ability to use history in meaningful ways.

Other critics dispute the value of standardized tests by asserting that tests restrict teacher initiative and make it impossible for teachers to respond to the needs of their individual classrooms. Instead, the teachers must attend to a limited scope of curriculum which can be tested which precludes flexibility, enrichment and the study of non-testable curriculum within social studies. Especially egregious to some is the issue of accountability where teachers are ultimately responsible for the outcome measures which result in a constant scrutiny with the teachers' and schools' reputation on the line (Burroughs, 2002). Others state that the use of high-stakes testing seriously threatens the diversity that has existed within the formal social studies curriculum as well as threatening the enacted social studies curriculum (Vinson & Ross, 2001).

Some opponents believe that enough assessment techniques are available to the social studies teacher to adequately assess student learning without high-stakes examinations. They feel that too much time and money are spent on these assessments, to the detriment of other activities. Also, these tests are seen as suspect for correctly measuring higher-level knowledge such as critical thinking and decision-making (Buckles, et.al, 2001).

Additional arguments include the belief that the emphasis of teachers preparing students for tests from January to the end of the school year has also become common in classrooms throughout Canada and the United States. Specific emphasis on only what is on the test has caused teachers to become managers of students rather than facilitators of knowledge and social values and have caused the discontinuance of programs which should be taught. There is an inevitable de-skilling of students by reducing learning to the level of developing test-taking strategies. (Stromquist, 2002; Shaw, 2000; Kohn, 2002; Cheng & Couture, 2000).

Questions are also raised regarding the adequacy of single indicators of achievement and the reporting of such indicators.

> We might ask, can a single indicator ever adequately measure reality? Perhaps more importantly for our purposes, given the importance of reporting to our various publics, we should be mindful that the inadequacies of indicator systems are not known to lay users, parents, and journalists and, however clearly presented, all indicators need interpretation (Bacon, 1995, p. 88).

Reviewing the opposing sides of testing in social studies, the argument for creating assessment that reflects the program of studies and focuses on critical thinking is strong. Any assessment that fails to measure the major social studies understandings, appreciations, life applications and higher-order thinking may be considered impoverished in its attempt to reflect the full range of abilities taught in social studies. Tests that only assess low-level knowledge and do not address critical thinking, problem solving or decision-making or other skills within the broad spectrum of social studies, fall short in their attempt of appropriate evaluation. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has argued for assessment that is well-aligned with major social studies goals, more complete in the range of objectives addressed and more authentic in the kinds of tasks included.

The NCSS Advisory Committee on Testing and Evaluation recommends that evaluation focused on curriculum goals and objectives be used to improve curriculum and instruction. Evaluation should measure both content and process, be chosen for diagnostic and prescriptive purposes and reflect a high degree of fairness to all people and groups. Evaluation of student achievement should also be used solely to improve teaching and learning; involve a variety of instruments and approaches to measure knowledge, skills and attitudes; be congruent with objectives; and be sequential and cumulative. To support this comprehensive approach, government agencies should secure appropriate funding to support evaluation programs and professional development of teachers (Alleman & Brophy, 1999).

Other leading scholars in the area of large-scale evaluation argue that social studies assessments should require that students to go beyond memorizing facts and engage in higher level skills such as application rather than the recall of isolated facts or definitions. Useful skills that should be evaluated include interpretation of social studies data, identification and explanation of important concepts as well as "making connections between these concepts and a position taken on contemporary public policy issues" (Brousseau, 1999, p. 358). Further, if evaluation could include tasks that are interesting and engaging to the students, as well as being multi-faceted, and assessing more than one aspect of achievement, it would improve the student's educational experience.

The nature of social studies content presents a challenge to large-scale assessment. Social studies educators seek to help students become critical thinkers, problem solvers and decision makers (Yell, 1999). Because the most common testing format is the ubiquitous multiple choice question, a low-level knowledge of objectives is measured rather than all the other higher-order thinking skills that are a critical element in an effective social studies classroom. Cornbleth (2001) posits that external examinations shape teachers' beliefs and practices in ways that inhibit teaching for meaningful learning and critical thinking that incorporates diverse perspectives and students. Others indicate that students show some familiarity with basic facts but have failed to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the broad spectrum of skills found in the social studies curriculum (Risinger & Garcia, 1995). Complex thinking and behaviours are seldom assessed and, through the overuse and misuse of testing, student achievement can become a wall of norms and numbers rather than a window into what learners can actually do. Only what can be counted, counts. What counts easily, counts most and if it cannot be reduced to a number, it does not count for much (Myers, 1997a). Thus, a tailored curriculum and pedagogy to fit the test is common, with a de-emphasis on those parts of the curriculum that are too difficult to test (Neill, 1999).

Case (1997a, 1997d) argues that many of the most important educational goals of social studies, such as students taking responsibility for their actions, solving real-life problems and issues, and the development of reflective, considerate individuals are rarely, if ever, measured by standardized tests. Too often what is easiest to measure is assessed, such as students' ability to remember information, and the more important but difficult skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills, are neglected. The limitations of what standardized tests can measure is readily seen in the inability to address complex learning outcomes and also lack of aptitude to integrate knowledge into realistic situations.

Supporting this argument, Longstreet (1996) emphasizes that social studies is typically expected to prepare students to be actively involved citizens of a democracy. This mandate means preparing them with the skills and the knowledge necessary to make intelligent decisions in the midst of uncertainty and compromise. In terms of content validity, can these types of tests offer a reasonable measure of what needs to be learned for citizenship? Unfortunately, the curriculum developed is more amenable to testing than it is for developing the skills for citizenship. The skills necessary for students to become more active and effective citizen in a democracy are not the same as those that are found in assessments. In fact, the kinds of knowledge and skills most relevant for effectively practicing citizenship in a democracy are incongruent with paper and pencil tests. In social studies, if the achievement of good citizenship were to be accepted as a primary goal of study, then behaviours involved in the effective exercise of citizenship in a democracy would become the basis for assessing achievement.

Longstreet (1996) also asserts that two major assumptions underlie standardized tests, such as the criterion-referenced tests used to assess mastery of a specified content domain. The first assumption is that social studies knowledge can be decomposed into discrete elements that lose little in their isolation from other related elements. The second assumption is that knowledge can be decontextualized or the concept that skills and insights acquired in one context can be easily transferred to other contexts. Thus, the notions of decomposability and decontextualization allow the tests to ask clear questions having very specific responses which ultimately result in objective standardized tests consistently evaluating a fairly low level of thinking. Stressing simple, isolated skills becomes the norm at the expense of the development of more complex, holistic ones such as critical and creative thinking, problem-solving and citizenship skills.

Curricular reductionism is also a problem vis-à-vis social studies assessment. Although teachers have always had to teach from within a mandated curricular framework, the degree to which they are free to exercise their independent judgement in the implementation of the curriculum is severely restricted with centralized testing. The teacher is constrained by having to cover course material precisely as it will appear on the examination, which results in a shift from student-centred to curriculum-centred instruction. This renewed emphasis on the importance of the curriculum as received text has led Kinchloe (2001) to suggest that the critical dimension of personal experience remains a largely unexplored aspect of social studies classes and that this component of the social studies curriculum is ignored because traditional methods of assessment have no means of evaluating it.

Another result of curricular reductionism is evident when the curricular area of social studies, which is fundamentally rooted in the uncertainties and complexities of social and political interaction, may be required to alter its complex and subjective nature to fit the requirements of test item structure. The types of the test items employed can trivialize the nature of the content. Also, there is a limitation on the range of subject areas included in the curriculum through the restriction of choices of subjects which are targeted for testing. The conceptualization and implementation of new areas of study are constrained under such circumstances. Thus, standardized testing contributes to the narrowing of the existing curriculum as well as to the continuation of a status quo curriculum (Longstreet, 1996).

Contextualizing this problem locally, Runte (1998) observes that the Alberta social studies curriculum leaves 20 percent of the course open to the instructor. The mere presence of centralized testing compromises this elective component, because the examination must emphasize the core curriculum that all students need to be taught. Curricular reductionism is evident as this elective component of the course typically changes into a further study of those learning outcomes which will be tested. In a study of Alberta teachers and the impact that the diploma examinations have on the teacher-learner process, Swanson (1994) indicates that nearly half of the teachers surveyed stated that having diploma examinations play a role in making them adhere to the Program of Studies. In the same survey, teachers were against having the diploma examinations shaping the curriculum; nonetheless, it was pointed out that more teachers are often teaching only the part of the curriculum that will be examined. Many teachers reported they eliminated or modified many elective activities such as field trips, labs, and discussion of current events. As an experienced developer of Social Studies 30 diploma examinations, Richardson (2002b) notes that what was mandated in the provincial program of studies was what was tested, with the examination increasingly dictating the curriculum.

Even with these limitations in mind, it is evident that in contrast to the producers of school-leaving examinations in many other jurisdictions, the Alberta examiners have attempted to design tests that emphasize skill development, critical thinking and a generalizable understanding of the subject matter, rather than rote learning and factual memorization (Runte, 1998).

School climate and teacher identity

The school climate many Alberta grade 12 social studies teachers currently find themselves in requires a strict adherence to the curriculum which is testable on high-stake examinations. An epistemic approach to curriculum is expected to be adopted where knowledge is viewed as fixed, discrete, isolated, verifiable and transferable from pedagogue to student. With this approach it is easier for social studies teachers to adopt the pedagogical methodology of transmission of knowledge versus the action approach, which is less amenable to testing. However, mere transmission prevents a fluid, flexible, and contingent curriculum which expresses something of the uncertainty, complexity and multiplicity of contemporary civic life. Through the study of the perspectives, practices and contexts of teaching, teachers are represented as complex beings.

Britzman (2003) asserts that educating others is a much more complex, ambiguous and paradoxical activity than is usually represented in the dominant discourse of educational success and failure. The rigid notions of authority and control that characterize the existing educational environment is distinguished by the current emphasis on standardized assessment. She sees that teacher's skills are reduced to custodial moments such as enforcing school rules, imparting prescribed textbook and curricular knowledge and grading students' responses.

> Hidden is the pedagogy teachers enact: the ways teachers render content and experience as pedagogical, consciously construct and innovate teaching methods, solicit and negotiate student concerns, and attempt to a balance the exigencies of curriculum with both the students' and their own visions of what it means to know (Britzman, 2003, p. 28).

The authoritative discourse imposed on teachers by high-stakes testing demands allegiance and partially determines a teacher's practice. This received and static knowledge disallows a dynamism of pedagogical delivery and choice. This stricture leads to the question, for whom does the teacher speak? Is it the mandated curriculum, the school, the profession, the students, the teacher? How does the teacher negotiate between the polyphony of voices and competing interests that each represent? How does a teacher make sense of his or her work? Education, when dominated by the discourse and discursive practices of conformity to the examinable curriculum, scripts a mechanistic pedagogy. This version of received knowledge suggests images of authority and power. Teachers realize that knowledge cannot be reduced to one universal meaning representable on an examination. Unfortunately, what is not as clear in discussions of the effect of standardized testing is the repression of the subjectivities of teachers and the reduction of pedagogical practice.

Britzman (2003) also posits that a teacher's work is to consider how the world is perceived through particular epistemological commitments and symbolic systems and how meanings are organized and produced within the multiple positions that teachers inhabit. The point is to reflect, in meaningful ways, upon the processes and forces that structure experience. Such reflections help theorize pedagogically about the antagonistic discourses that position a sense of the practical, the real and the necessary. External expectations and one's own beliefs as a teacher create tensions which, at times, are difficult to deal with. Suppressing one's own subjectivities to conform to an external requirement creates internal, conflictual attacks on one's teaching identity. Social studies teachers increasingly find themselves in this milieu.

In response to the tension that teachers face, it is important for each teacher to create an understanding of themselves through their narratives and in doing so gain what Connelly & Clandinin (1988) call a "personal practical knowledge" which

> is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past with the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 25).

Through the teacher's own stories or narratives of experience an understanding of teacher identity emerges, reflecting a personal as well as a professional history based on the contexts in which teachers find themselves. Roberts (1998) states that through stories, we relate our lives to ourselves and others and attempt to make sense of our experiences. In doing so, we give an account of who we are. Connelly & Clandinin (1999) feel that a nexus of a teacher's knowledge, context and identity allows a teacher's narrative to emerge and a self-understanding to be more firmly established. Through these stories of teacher identities, the tension and splits between what a teacher's goals and wants are and the expectations and conditions placed upon them by external entities are revealed. Erben (1998) maintains that narrative analysis is able to weave social context and individual life together more than any other method with the purpose of enabling an understanding of how a teacher's identity is impacted by external forces.

Conclusion

A review of the literature on curriculum, teaching and assessment in social studies makes it clear that teachers' pedagogical practices are significantly impacted in high-stakes testing environments. While the stress on mandated assessment may focus and standardize the curriculum, the benefits of standardization must be carefully balanced against the importance of promoting meaningful learning, developing higher-order thinking skills, and encouraging creative interaction in social studies classrooms. To help achieve this balance, and understand how teachers negotiate their teaching practices and identities in the space between curricular prescription and professional autonomy, this research focuses on social studies teachers' lived experiences of teaching in a high-stakes testing environment.

CHAPTER THREE:

HERMENEUTICS, INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Introduction

This research is a qualitative interpretive inquiry based on two related questions: How do social studies teachers experience teaching a class in which an externally mandated examination is required for their students to write, and, how do external examinations impact social studies teachers' pedagogy? The research explores how the diploma examinations in Social Studies 30 (Grade 12), required by Alberta Learning (currently Alberta Education), impact the pedagogical practices of the teachers who must prepare the students for these examinations. The results of the research provide a clearer understanding of how teachers perceive the changes in pedagogy due to high-stake examinations as well as the impact mandated examinations have on the lived realities of teachers in the classroom.

The understandings of social studies, assessment and their relationship to each other as described in Chapter Two provide the discipline-related foundation for the study. Along with these understandings it is also important to consider the ambiguities and tensions teachers face as they rationalize and try to make sense of competing demands the social studies curriculum and high-stakes testing place on them. To best capture the participant's stories along with the intricacies and nuances of meaning, I employed the method of hermeneutical conversations which allowed for the narratives of each teacher involved in this research to emerge.

A hermeneutically-based research project can escape the confining and detached regulations of the research methods privileged in the natural sciences and provide an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the lived realities of those involved in the human sciences. To appreciate the effectiveness of hermeneutic research, it is useful to provide an overview of the various traditions and orientations within hermeneutics. This overview will examine how hermeneutics influences the field of education as well as providing an important approach to inquiry in educational research. In relation to this specific research, I argue that hermeneutic inquiry allows us to seek questions and interpretations and thus discover the ambiguities and contingencies of the lived realities of social studies teachers who are impacted by the presence of standardized examinations.

The study of hermeneutics has enjoyed a long and distinguished history through the centuries. Originally used for biblical interpretation, more recently it has become the philosophical support for studies in various fields including education. Hermeneutics is primarily a philosophical discipline which deals with questions of what enables interpretation and understanding (Smits, 2001b). In contrast to the strict requirements and methods of the natural sciences, "engaging in hermeneutic activity is simply the ordinary work of trying to make sense of things we don't understand, things that fall outside our taken for-granted assumptions about the nature of experience" (Smith, 2002, p. 183). In fact, hermeneutical thinkers would argue against the assumption that understanding takes place in conditions that are always and everywhere the same. (Wachterhauser, 1986). Rather, its emphasis is on interpretation, which is evident in the Greek roots of the verb, *hermeneuein* (to interpret) and the noun *hermeneia* (interpretation). While not rejecting the scientific methodologies appropriate for the natural sciences, advocates of hermeneutics see it as a more suitable approach for the human sciences.

Origins and characteristics of hermeneutics

The origins of hermeneutics are almost as old as the recorded study of philosophy itself. Aristotle wrote the major treatise, *Peri Hermeneias* (On Interpretation) and the Greek wing-footed messenger-god, Hermes, is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence is able to grasp, a turning of an unintelligible thing or situation into understanding. Hermes has been credited with the discovery of language and writing, the very tools which humans employ to grasp meaning and convey it to others (Palmer, 1969).

Initially, hermeneutics was developed to interpret the Bible, which, while considered to be a work of divine inspiration, needed to be interpreted so that the significance of the divine revelation could be applied to one's life in general (Silverman, 1994). It was the Reformation which produced an enormous expansion in the use of hermeneutics as both Catholic and Protestant theologians argued over the "correct" principles to be employed in interpreting the Bible. Hermeneutical scholars have viewed this period as the genesis of modern hermeneutics and the application of hermeneutics was not limited to interpretation of the Bible only. Even earlier, during the late middle ages, hermeneutics had also been applied to the interpretation of legal judgements and then later, during the Renaissance period, it was also applied to philology in an effort to revive classical learning (Moran, 2000). The interpretation of past meanings through the study of linguistics allowed for the bringing of appropriate messages to contemporary audiences (Carson, 1984).

The primary function of hermeneutics is to stress the interpreter's relation to the interpreted and the understanding that arises out of that relation.

> [H]ermeneutics stresses the act of mediation between an interpreter and the interpreted…. Interpretation is an act, that if successful, produces understanding. The task of interpretation is to understand that which is to be interpreted. To produce an interpretation is to come up with an understanding of the interpreted (Silverman, 1994, p. 11).

Interpretation itself is a new and unique production of work. It is not merely a specular reproduction of what is being interpreted. According to Gallagher (1992), interpretations never simply repeat, copy, reproduce or restore the interpreted in its originality. Interpretation produces something new and this original insight gives meaning and understanding to the interpreter.

A unique characteristic of hermeneutical inquiry is that it accords priority to questioning, which results in a persistent search for questioning about meaning. These questions resist easy answers or solutions. There is a search for finding the genuine question; but, in finding the genuine question it must be recognized that there may be genuine questions but never final or closed ones. A distinctive feature of hermeneutics is that this form of inquiry remains open-ended and ambiguous. "A genuine question is more important than settling finally on solutions or answers" (Smits, 2001b).

The major traditions within modern hermeneutics

There are several traditions within the field of modern hermeneutical inquiry, each taking a different approach to interpretation. The first to arise was textually-based or conservative hermeneutics and its primary concern was that of interpretation of texts to gain an understanding of them. It became the task of some scholars during the

Enlightenment to attempt to systematize hermeneutics into a general method of understanding. An early writer in hermeneutics said that an interpretation has to be correct and it must teach us the kinds of thoughts which ultimately allow us to come closer to an understanding of the text (Chladenius, 1742/1985). This tradition is predicated on the view that meaning is relatively fixed and that it is embodied in language structures that are discernible and universal. Thus the meaning of any text can be clearly established and the aim of interpretation is to use the appropriate techniques to uncover that meaning.

During the 19th century, both Friederich Schleiermacher and his successor William Dilthey further developed the conservative hermeneutical approach in trying to expand the focus of interpretation to that of all human experience (Richardson, 2002b). It was thought that, through correct methodology and hard work, the interpreter should be able to break out of his or her own historical epoch to understand the author as the author intended or to transcend historical limitations to reach universal or at least objective truth. The aim of interpretation is to reproduce the meaning of intention of the author by following well-defined hermeneutical canons that guide reading (Gallagher, 1992).

Schleiermacher's fundamental aim was to frame a "general" hermeneutics as an art of understanding. This art would apply to any text, whether it was scripture, a legal document or a work of literature. Underneath the differences in these types of texts lay a fundamental unity; and, if the principles of all understanding were formulated, these would comprise a general hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969). Schleiermacher further believed that, for this approach to be successful, a person must be familiar with the language of the author as it was used at the time the text was written and must be able to get into the mindset of the author and the original lived experience (Moran, 2000). Dilthey broadened the scope of hermeneutic theory to cover all meaningful human action. In his view, hermeneutic principles lay at the basis of all the historical sciences (Lamore, 1986).

One of Schleiermacher's enduring contributions to hermeneutics is his concept of the hermeneutical circle. He states, paradoxically, that meaning of the part is only understood within the context of the whole; but the whole is never given unless through an understanding of the parts. Understanding therefore requires a circular movement from parts to whole and whole to parts. The more movement in this circle, the larger the circle grows, embracing the expanding contexts that throw an increasing amount of light on the parts. By dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning and understanding is seen to be circular (Gallagher, 1992; Palmer, 1969).

Dilthey wanted to show that knowledge in the social sciences was fundamentally different from that of knowledge in the natural sciences. He saw humans having the capacity for self-interpretation which implies that we have the capacity to define and shape our own lives in response to the historical situations we find ourselves in, hence history and our response to it becomes the key to unlock the secrets of human life (Wachterhauser, 1986). A key concept introduced by Dilthey was that of *Erlebnis*, or "lived experience". Human understanding is a category of life and we are surrounded by the expressions of life. We understand them to the degree to which we can show how they emerge from lived experience (*Erlebnis*). He believed that "all understanding contains something irrational because life is irrational" (Dilthey, 1927/1985).

Because of this distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences, Dilthey declared that the research methods must be different. "Nature we can explain, but humans we must understand" (Smith, 2002, p. 187). For Dilthey, 'explanation' referred to the model of intelligibility borrowed from the natural sciences and applied to the historical disciplines by positivist schools. 'Interpretation', on the other hand, was a derivative form of understanding, which Dilthey regarded as the fundamental attitude of the human sciences and which alone can preserve the fundamental difference between these sciences and the sciences of nature (Ricoeur, 1981).

Edmund Husserl continued pursuing this hermeneutical venture and, according to Smith (1991), was the most significant shaper of all the interpretive streams of human science with his massive project that helped overturn the Enlightenment ideal of objective reason. He believed that a split between subjective and objective thinking was ridiculous since subjectivity gets its bearings from the very world that is taken as object. From Husserl on, words like "understanding", "interpretation" and "meaningfulness" are rooted in the dialogical, intersubjective, and conversational nature of human experience.

For Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl's, the scientific attempt to step back and examine an object severs it from its living context. He abandons the term "subject" and introduces his notion of "*Dasein*", in which self and the world belong together in a single entity. *Dasein* translates literally as "there-being" and insists on the contingent situatedness of our condition in space and time. We will always find ourselves in a set of spatio-temporal circumstances, that are never entirely of our own making and that we cannot leave behind at will (Wachterhauser, 1986). He also posited that self and world are not two beings, like subject and object. Rather, self and world are the unity of the structure of "being-in-the-world" (Steele, 1997) and, with this emphasis, hermeneutics took a decidedly ontological turn.

Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, built on his teacher's ontological hermeneutics and developed what has become known as moderate or philosophical hermeneutics. He asserted that the "Being that can be understood is language", all understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of language (Gadamer, 1975). Gadamer believed that we are conditioned by prejudices embedded in language which limits our interpretive powers and prevents one from gaining absolute meaning. He believed that we never achieve a complete or objective interpretation since we are limited by our own language and historical situation (Gallagher, 1992). This new concept stood in stark contrast to the conservative hermeneutical view of gaining objective interpretation. With the publication of his book, which he ironically titled *Truth and Method*, Gadamer disabuses any notion that truth is arrived at through method. On the contrary, truth eludes the methodical person because the question of method cannot be separated from the idea of inquiry. It is impossible to establish a correct method before an encounter with what is being investigated. This is because what is being investigated holds at least part of the answer of how it should be investigated (Smith, 2002).

Philosophical hermeneutics is not concerned with methods of interpretation and understanding but rather with the question of what enables understanding to occur. For Gadamer, it is not the procedures of coming to an understanding that are important, instead it is what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing. Thus hermeneutics is not about the recovery of existing meanings; but instead, the creation of meaning itself and understanding is composed of both previous and new meanings (Smits, 2001b). Furthermore, Gadamer (1975, 1986) asserts that the central task of hermeneutics, while originally being concerned with the understanding of texts, has come to also include the oral utterance and the comprehension of what is said, whether written or oral, as its sole concern.

Gadamer has become well known during the last half of the twentieth century for several major developments in hermeneutics besides the dialectic of truth and method. He also believed that the philosophers of the Enlightenment erred in their belief that prejudices were purely negative and something which had to be overcome in the search for objective truth. On the contrary, Gadamer maintains prejudice is a necessary condition of all historical (and other) understanding (Mueller-Volmer, 1985). For Gadamer, our prejudices do not constitute a wilful blindness, which prevents us from grasping the truth; rather they are what we stand on to help launch our understanding. Indeed, this initial set of beliefs allows us to interrogate the topic under discussion. He believed that the demand to overcome prejudice is itself a form of prejudice and that the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment was the "prejudice against prejudice", which deprives tradition of its authority (Moran, 2000). He posits that the prejudices of the individual, far more than personal judgements, constitute the historical reality of being and through prejudice, he seeks a "rehabilitation of authority and tradition" (Westphal, 1986, p. 65).

Another important conceptualization delineated by Gadamer was his notion of the "effective-historical consciousness". He believed that the historical object and the hermeneutical operation of the interpreter are both a part of a historical and cultural operation tradition or continuum which he calls "effective history". This continuum is the ultimate cause of the prejudices which guide our understanding and, because prejudices function as a necessary condition of historical understanding, Gadamer argues, prejudices should be made the object of hermeneutical reflection. To engage in such hermeneutic reflection and to determine one's own hermeneutic situation is the development of a historical-effective consciousness or an understanding of the historical continuum in which one belongs (Mueller-Volmer, 1985). Sedimented history serves as the horizon in which our present acts take on meaning. With recollection, the past is actively appropriated to the self. But this appropriation is always an interpretation of the past and a selective and imaginative retelling of it from the perspective of the present (Kerby, 1991).

In further explicating this theory, Gadamer develops the concept of the fusion of horizons. The idea that communication at a distance between two differently situated consciousnesses occurs by means of the fusion of their horizons which indicates the intersection of their views (Ricoeur, 1981). He further defines horizon as the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. The horizon of the past, out of which all human lives and tradition exist, is always in motion and the hermeneutic act brings the horizons of the past and present into fusion (Steele, 1997). Gadamer enlarges our understanding of how truth does not necessarily exist in the world, but is continually fixed and unfixed in our continual relationships with a world. For Gadamer, hermeneutics is not about locating or fixing truth; rather it is about the ongoing process of understanding the conditions necessary for understanding to occur (Sumara, 1994).

To allow a clearer picture of the various hermeneutic traditions available to the researcher, it would be helpful to compare philosophical hermeneutics. This is the basis of my study, with other contemporary iterations so as to more clearly define what is meant by a hermeneutic research project. Within the last century, a theoretical construct known as radical hermeneutics has developed. Originally inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, its more current proponents include poststructuralists and deconstructionists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. To them, interpretation requires playing with words rather than using them to find truth in or beyond the text. The radical hermeneut is sceptical about creative interpretations that establish communication with original meaning. Original meaning is unattainable and the best that can be expected is to stretch the limits of language to break upon fresh insight. Radical hermeneutics aims at deconstructing the meaning of a text which is displacement of certain metaphysical concepts such as unity, meaning or authorship. The hope is not to create some other version, but to show all versions are contingent and relative (Gallagher, 1992).

John Caputo (1987), in his book *Radical Hermeneutics*, contends that this tradition is an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not betray it with metaphysics. He asserts that this iteration of hermeneutics is for the hardy. It is a radical thinking which is suspicious of the easy way out, and is especially suspicious of philosophy or metaphysics which is trying to do just that. He states,

> hermeneutics always has to do with keeping the difficulty of life alive and with keeping its distance from the easy assurances of metaphysics and the consolations of philosophy. What I call here "radical hermeneutics" pushes itself to the brink and writes philosophy from the edge, which is why it sometimes speaks of the "end of philosophy". For it does not trust

> philosophy's native desire for its desire for presence, and it will not entrust movement and the flux to the care of philosophy (Caputo, 1987, p. 3).

Radical hermeneutics is also suspicious of the concept that language can be a transcendent scheme for fixing meaning. In fact, its advocates assert that the purpose of radical hermeneutical interpretation is not to establish meaning but, instead, to establish the principle of contingency. In saying that interpretive acts are relative and contingent, radical hermeneutics rejects the possibility of the fusion of horizons that Gadamer contends is the goal of hermeneutics (Richardson, 2002b).

Another tradition found within contemporary hermeneutical thought is critical hermeneutics. Gallagher (1992) explains how twentieth century thinkers Jurgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel developed this version, with the express aim of marrying hermeneutics to critical theory. Critical theory's goal is the social and individual emancipation from the political power and economic forces found in advanced class systems. Hermeneutics is then employed as a means of penetrating false consciousness, discovering the ideological nature of belief systems, promoting distortion-free communication, as well as accomplishing a liberating consensus. Habermas further believes in a "depth" hermeneutics which uncovers and undoes the deception and distortion inherent in communication.

Hermeneutics, placed in the service of critical theory, calls for a special and suspicious interpretation of any and all ideologies and institutions that support or maintain ruling power structures. The four main principles of critical hermeneutics include reproduction, hegemony, reflection and application. The first two principles must be recognized and circumvented, while the latter two are recognized as principles of possibility. The aim of critical hermeneutics is to move away from reproduction because it legitimizes the traditional power structures. For critical hermeneutics, reproduction is largely an unconscious, unreflective diffusion of the authority and power structures of tradition. Hegemony is also to be avoided. Critical theorists see interpretation more than linguistic, as philosophical hermeneutical scholars would stress. Rather, the social conditions and power relations always condition the acquisition and use of language to some degree and create a hegemonic relationship with language. Forces concealed in linguistic behaviour are seen to determine interpretation and it is these nefarious forces that must be revealed and disposed of so that true emancipation can occur.

The last two principles of critical hermeneutics include reflection and application and are seen as methods of emancipation. Reflection is seen as a method to neutralize the biases of tradition; therefore, interpretation can be freed from distortion. Interpretation, if critically based, always has a positive application vis-à-vis the emancipation of the interpreter from authoritative structures (Gallagher, 1992).

Hermeneutics and educational practice

The foregoing overview of hermeneutics provides a foundation to assess the possibilities this philosophical discipline has for education practice in general. Smith (1991, 2002) believes that hermeneutical inquiry allows us to inquire what we mean when we use words like curriculum, research and pedagogy. Inquiry will aid in furthering our understanding of what makes it possible for us to speak, think and act in the ways that we do and in relation to those that we as teachers come into contact with everyday, such as peers, administrators, and most importantly students. He also asserts that we live in a world of mutually affecting entities where our actions have an effect on those with whom we come into contact and conversely where we are also affected by their actions. Hermeneutics not only studies this mutual effect, but also includes an enactment of a particular kind of responsibility for oneself as an integral part of interpretation of other things and people. This allows for the opportunity of self-understanding to change as one's own interpretations are shown to need revision. This hermeneutical act is both educational and pedagogical in that it is an act of simultaneous learning and teaching.

Hermeneutical inquiry also provides an opportunity to ask questions about how meaning is derived in education and how teachers are implicated in that meaning. Further, hermeneutic investigations situate us in a particular historical tradition which allows us to see both how we are guided and constrained by our prejudices and how these prejudices influence our relations with others. With this awareness enters the possibility that teachers and students can enter their own hermeneutic circle. Thus the modernist Cartesian constructs of a knowable object, being presented by a teacher who is "in the know" and who is passing on this knowledge to the *tabula rasa* presented in form of students, can be rejected in favour of a more ambiguous, democratic relationship where both students and teachers ask questions together. This newly-created space verifies Caputo's (1987) concept of "difficulty", but it also allows for a place where "fusions of horizons" can be achieved. This fusion can only take place if the traditions and experiences of all the participants in the hermeneutic circle can be shared. The teacher's role ensures that this "situated facilitation" occurs. (Richardson, 2002b).

Sumara (1994) presents a conceptual revision of curricular understanding based on hermeneutical inquiry. Traditionally, curriculum has been seen as a set of "directions" which guide student/teacher interaction so that predictable learning outcomes result. This approach to curriculum that has enabled the separation of curriculum and life.

> Hermeneutically speaking, this striving for method is a response to our condition of no longer being at home in the world, largely as a consequence of being unaware of our historically effected presence. Method aims to stand in place of this loss of historically understanding and belonging by substituting reflective knowledge with a form of knowledge which pretends to understand everything in advance. Method seeks to exclude the unexpected, the accidental, the mistake. Just as Descartes believed that disciplined human reason could protect against error, the curriculum which is founded upon pre-determined methods and plans believes that adherence to these will ensure effective teaching and learning (Sumara, 1994, p. 103).

In contrast to a methodological approach, curriculum could be better described as embodied action which allows for students and teachers to experience mutual events that are inextricable from the ever-evolving world in which each is situated.

Turning to pedagogy, Jardine (1998) believes that there is a straightforward sense in which interpretive work is pedagogic. It is concerned with the regeneration of meaning and allows new understandings to erupt and lets the old and already established and familiar to regenerate and renew itself. Also, interpretive inquiry is pedagogic in the sense that the process of interpretation is not the accumulation of new objective information. Rather, it is a transformation of understanding.

Gallagher (1992) believes that the classroom model leads us to characterize educational experience as a complex interchange of interpretations in which each may itself be complex: an interpretation conditioned by and also conditioning other interpretations. Because of this, educational experience can always be considered a hermeneutical experience since learning always involves interpretation. Students are involved in interpreting the pedagogical presentation and must, in some way, deal with it and as a result several consequences can occur. A drawing toward the teacher's own understanding can result or the student may be inspired in a different and totally unintended direction or may even be misled by the presentation. No matter what the case, the student is involved in interpretation. The hermeneutic circle can also be present in the act of teaching in that the teacher remains open to an ongoing dialogue between an understanding of the subject matter and the presentation to the class. In the process of instruction, the teacher is required to go through the whole process of interpretation again. Teaching is, in part, a dialogue with self which includes evaluation of differing interpretations which are in constant flux. The teacher's understanding of the subject matter governs his presentation and may change as differing interpretations are made. The interchange of interpretations should not be viewed as an exchange of finished products.

Several principles characterize a theory of education which is founded on a moderated hermeneutical philosophy. Educational experience has a hermeneutical circular structure. In other words, it involves the hermeneutical circle where the learner's attempt to understand that which is to be learned is always guided by a fore-conception that provides a context for the learning to take place. Tradition constrains the educational experience, cannot be ignored, and continues to live and prejudice the learning process both negatively and positively. The linguistic nature of hermeneutics is also mirrored in education. Language is the medium of education and learning always happens by way of an understanding conditioned by language. Educational experience is always productive in that it allows for the renewal of traditions, whereby these traditions that come down to us, when conceived differently, are made a part of oneself. Participants neither escape nor merely repeat traditions; but rather they transform them.

The hermeneutical structure of educational experience is the same as that of questioning. Involvement with the questioning process is what allows one into the educational event and also what makes up its course. Application is involved, though not necessarily in the instrumental or external sense but more in the fundamental sense of making something relevant to oneself. Self-understanding is another integral part of educational experience and is not simply an end result of education but a constant and renewable process and involves an interpretation of the world, a movement out toward possibilities that are made one's own. Educational experience has a dimension in that learning involves self-responsibility, to the extent that the learner becomes involved in the experience and finds him or herself in the process of self-understanding (Gallagher, 1992). These principles encapsulate the connection between the philosophy of moderate hermeneutics and the practice of education.

Hermeneutics and educational research

Turning one's attention to educational research, it is evident that hermeneutical inquiry also has an important role to play in this field. As a form of interpretive inquiry, contemporary hermeneutics can be described as the perpetual need to be responsible for our knowledge, our actions and our ontological self which are understood in relation to our historically-effected situations. Thus, the responsibility of hermeneutics is not about reporting how things are or were. Instead its responsibility entails a mediation of some of the contingencies of life that we experience (Sumara, 1994).

Philosophical hermeneutics reminds us that understanding is implicit in and made possible through communication. Gadamer makes it clear that conversation is central to the process of understanding. Conversation is a process of give and take between self and the other, and is always oriented to something that requires understanding (Smits, 2001b).

> According to Gadamer the ontological structure of a genuine question is one of openness lying in the direction of that which is questionable. Conversation as a mode of research allows the participants as educators to pursue the question objectively as a problem of practice, while at the same time acknowledging its implications from them as practitioners (Carson, 1984, p. v & vi).

What emerges in beginning a conversation is that it is neither owned by the questioner or the interviewee, but it is an experience in which they both dwell together. No one knows the full story each is living out. This is why dialogue and conversation are salient features of interpretive work. A hermeneutic notion of understanding returns inquiry in education to the original and difficult interpretive play in which we live our lives together and it returns inquiry to the need and possibility of true conversation (Jardine, 1998, 2000). Only through talk can different ways of grouping data emerge, and new insights be gained or new questions asked that will allow for a revelation of understanding or theoretical breakthrough (Wachterhauser, 1986). Thus conversation is necessary to gain a deeper, more adequate understanding of that which is being discussed.

Similar to the hermeneutic circle, interpretive inquiry has no definite beginning or ending points because, as a part of the ongoing conversation, inquiry can only slip into that which is already there. This form of inquiry is not concerned with creating new sites of objective inquiry; rather, it is about existing in the midst of already-there sites in order to come to a deeper understanding of what the experience of being-there means (Sumara, 1994).

Gadamer expresses the importance of questioning in the human sciences in that its most important function allows truth to emerge.

> It has emerged throughout our investigation that the certainty that is imparted by the use of scientific methods does not suffice to guarantee truth. This is so especially of the human sciences, but this does not mean a diminution of their scientific quality, but on the contrary, the justification of the claim to special human significance that they have always made. The fact that in the knowing involved in them the knower's own being is involved marks, certainly the limitation of 'method', but not that of science. Rather, what the tool of method does not achieve must – and effectively can – be achieved by a discipline of questioning and research, a discipline that guarantees truth (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 446 &447).

Hermeneutics privileges questioning as a mode of research. The questions are not just of any type but are questions not amenable to simplistic answers or solutions. Gadamer felt that one must find the "genuine" question and not view them as absolute or closed with predetermined answers. Hermeneutical inquiry remains open-ended. In fact, hermeneutics places greater value on the genuine question than the resultant answers or solutions (Smits, 2001b).

Another form of hermeneutical research, closely related to conversation and questioning, is narrative. Smits (2001b) maintains that narrative represents a way that we try to give shape to our understandings. Kerby (1991) also emphasizes the role of narrative in research and feels that our understanding of other cultures and people is gained from, and in the form of, narrative that are about and by those peoples. The rationale for this has to do with the way that narratives articulate both isolated acts and whole sequences of events, thereby placing these events within a framing context or history. This form of contextualizing has been recognized as crucial to all forms of understanding. Recalling the hermeneutic circle, where parts can be only understood in relation to the whole and conversely, understanding of the whole can only be understood in its relation to the parts, it could be concluded that, through the process of narration, understanding of not only how individual acts give meaning to the larger context in which they exist, but also that the milieu of actions gives meaning to the individual acts. In other words, the isolated acts need to be placed in a developing network of other acts so their significance can be grasped. It is in and through various forms of narratives that our lives, and the lives of others with whom we have shared narratives, have attained meaning.

Validity in hermeneutic research also takes a different form than that of the natural sciences. Carson (1984) follows Gadamer's lead and posits that there exists no privileged externalized way of determining validity. But this does not mean that hermeneutic research can be considered without the capacity to show validity. Practical action has its own "validity for practical purposes" which is derived from the actor's stock of knowledge and also from the knowledge that he or she must act. Research findings show that the meanings of the participants as the acting subjects have a validity as the representations of those meanings for participants. Continuing in the same vein, the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur allow for a further validity beyond the intersubjective agreement by turning outwards from these internalized meanings to a common world. Thus hermeneutic research contains a self-implicated validity, oriented towards practical action.

To complete the survey of the application of hermeneutics to educational research it would be valuable to compare and contrast this form of inquiry with the prevailing scientific research methods which have become the privileged, dominant forms of research in both the natural sciences as well as much of the field of education. Positivist inquiry, based on scientific methodology, grew out of Enlightenment thinking which asserted that everything of value can be knowable and that which is not knowable does not count as knowledge or truth. Unfortunately, this approach, when applied to the human sciences and education is clearly an impoverished method. Jardine (1998) contrasts the two forms of inquiry and shows that, while the scientific approach is effective in the world of natural science, there is no direct applicability to educational research. With scientific inquiry, ambiguity is seen as a problem that needs to be fixed. Repeatable occurrences alone are considered significant. This approach requires that a substantial number of respondents will cite the same experiences, use the same words and concepts and speak in the same terms. An isolated incident can never have meaning but must be replicated to prove that it is meaningful.

Another characteristic of positivist research is that the researcher is removed from the research other than being merely an observer and collector of data. This objectivity rules out any unanticipated interchanges even though they still occur. Those who utilize this method view these occurrences as anomalies that remain meaningless with no claim to further understanding and truth. The stringent evaluative criteria of validity and reliability provide the researcher with a belief in the accuracy and dependability of the results.

In contrast, hermeneutical inspired interpretive inquiry suggests that there is a truth to be understood in the experiences that cannot be proven by the methods employed in the scientific approach and which the empirical approach would omit because of their non-replicable nature. Interpretive research begins, not in the controllable methodology of technical science, but rather in the tangled ambiguity of the incident itself. The task of interpretation is to evoke the meaning of these actions and to attempt to understand what they are saying to us about our shared lives. A claim to truth is made as we peel back the intimate layers inherent in the incident and relate these to our lived reality. Interpretive inquiry does not stake a claim to what the incident means, once and for all. Instead, it explores the possibilities of what understandings can be brought to light through exploration of its ambiguities. Hermeneutic inquiry allows for a reading and a re-reading of possibilities. It approaches the unknown as familiar by relating it to prior knowledge and also views the familiar as alien by viewing it from a new and different perspective.

Richardson (2002b) views hermeneutical inquiry as seeking neither answers nor silence. Instead, it accepts the ambiguity that comes with interpretation. The ability to see what is questionable typifies the hermeneutic search for meaning. Hermeneutical inquiry is not synonymous with the search for absolute meaning. Instead it is a difficult and exploratory searching with the goal to come to a mediated sense of meaning in one's life.

Another feature of interpretive inquiry that adds strength to its approach is that it offers the reflexivity required to see the deceptive allure of the subjective-objective split. Research does not entail an investigation into something that exists outside of our own subjectivities. Instead, it is a practice of knowing that constructs the reality to know about something else. Thus, learning about teaching is not something separate from learning about one's own self (Smits, 2001b).

In reviewing the differences between the major paradigms of research, it is abundantly evident that hermeneutic inquiry provides a legitimate philosophical structure for educational research. Avoiding the detached, observational approach, it allows for interpretation of an activity from within the ambiguities of unique experiences. Sumara (1994) has succinctly summarized the nexus of hermeneutical inquiry and educational research in four major points. First, this type of research seeks to locate sites for inquiry that situate interpreters in the midst of activities related to some topic of mutual interest. Second, it seeks to situate all participants in activities which allow the path of inquiry to be "laid by walking". In hermeneutic inquiry, method depends upon interpretations given to questions which "present themselves" rather than questions that are predetermined. Third, hermeneutic inquiry does not seek comfortable situations or solutions, but rather seeks the rupture – the breach – to illuminate what is silenced and deferred in the ordinary course of daily events. Finally, hermeneutic inquiry must never devolve into reports of what was done, discovered or concluded, but must show the ongoing and co-evolving relationship between doing, knowing and being, taking both an epistemological and ontological turn.

The hermeneutic circle and its implications for educational research

The preceding overview of hermeneutic traditions introduced the concept of the hermeneutic circle but a more comprehensive understanding of the hermeneutic circle and its relation to educational research must be explored. In review, this special circle describes the relationship between the parts and the whole of understanding. To understand a part, the whole must be understood and, for the whole to be comprehended, one must understand the individual parts. Merriam (1998) reveals the nexus between the hermeneutic circle and qualitative research, positing that this type of research can reveal how all the parts of the data work together to form a whole, which also allows the whole to inform an understanding of the parts. A researcher must enter the hermeneutic circle with a genuine entry question which is real, rather than abstract, and to which the researcher does not already know the answer or anticipate the response (Seidman, 1991). Genuine entry questions deal with practical concerns, are relatively simple and open and do not imply an answer.

Ellis (1998) further conceptualizes the hermeneutic circle by illustrating that the forward arc of this circle allows the researcher to make initial sense of the participant, text or data. The backward arc is one of introspection as one evaluates the initial interpretation and searches for further confirmation or contradictory inconsistencies while realizing that an inquiry into what was absent in the data is as important as engaging that which is present. Personalizing this, my role as researcher includes the act of reflexivity in which I also assess my own relation to the discussion and evaluate my own responses to the issues raised within the conversation. My own forestructure, pre-understandings, experiences, and theoretical positions are considered an integral part of the interpretation and understandings generated within the hermeneutic circle. A co-emergence of meaning results when all participants actively engage in this reciprocal form of conversational research.

Hermeneutics, language and the educational researcher

Building on Gadamer's (1975) concept of the fundamental role language plays in understanding and interpretation, hermeneutics sees language as the foundation of understanding. The language of the interpreter enables a more complete understanding but, because no researcher has a full command of language, it can also limit understanding. Furthermore, language changes over time which allows our interpretations to be transformed. A researcher using the hermeneutical foundation needs to take responsibility for not only for his or her own language but also for the language of others since the researcher is the primary instrument of the research. Their language provides interpretation and understanding of meaning and these interpretations reflect a spatio-temporal nature which indicates a mirroring of influences from time, place and community (Ellis, 1998, Gadamer, 1975).

Interpretive inquiry as the mode of research

"The aim of interpretive inquiry is not to write the end of an existing story but to write a more helpful beginning for new stories" (Ellis, 1998, p. 10). In her explication of the nature of interpretive inquiry and its importance as a mode of research, Ellis explains how hermeneutics clearly informs this form of research. As opposed to presenting a final solution to a problem, interpretive inquiry's hermeneutical approach allows for more fecund thought processes in our endeavours to gain wisdom and provides an openness to further inquiry. Interpretive inquiry draws on Gadamer's (1975) "fusions of horizons" concept where our forestructure or prejudices change when they come into contact with the horizons of others. This fusion occurs as an expansion of each person's horizon and is enlarged due to the conversation of the interlocutors. An openness to consider and examine life in its complexity and its totality characterizes the hermeneutically inspired interpretive inquirer. An authentic interest in the research participants is evident through an openness, humility and concerned engagement. Hermeneutics inherent holistic approach facilitates laying down the path as one walks along which, in turn, allows for creativity to emerge in the attempt to understand meaning. Creativity encourages openness which allows for new and original interpretations to emerge.

Ellis (1997) uses the metaphor of an unfolding spiral to further explicate the processes of interpretive inquiry. Each loop in the spiral represents a separate activity which entails data collection and interpretation. The questions for each new loop have been generated by what was revealed by the dialogical encounter of the previous loop. Each loop's findings usually uncover new understandings which may alter the direction of the research. A sense of revelation takes place as some findings will match what the researcher expected but some can result in unexpected surprises which may cause the researcher to understand the original question differently. This bringing to light of new and interesting dimensions is an integral part to interpretive inquiry and also allows for a more complete understanding of the hermeneutic circle. The forward arc allows the researcher to understand the data filtered through one's pre-understandings. The return arc revisits the initial interpretation to re-examine it to see what may have been missed in the initial interpretation.

Writing is also an integral component of the interpretive process. Understandings have grown and new meanings have emerged throughout the writing process. It is not necessary to know everything about what is going to be written as one starts to write because, through the writing process, new insights emerge as the composition flows. The revelation as a result of writing has allowed me the researcher to question, provide clarification and form more elaborate understandings and meanings of what is being explored. It also has provided a pedagogical opportunity in that, when made public, the writing of this account will instruct others about these understandings. The goal is that a rich, descriptive writing will enable readers with different horizons to construct their own interpretations of the findings and create understandings relevant to their own experiences.

Along with the emergence of new meaning through the writing process, self-criticality and reflexivity, or the self-awareness along with a perception of the relationship between myself, the investigator, and the research environment became vital to the interpretive inquiry. After a reflection on the entire study itself, the questions asked, the meanings that emerged and the impact of my own forestructure, it is evident that they provide an appreciation of the shortcomings of my own pre-understandings. This is a necessary part of the writing in that it shows how my own understandings have been transformed by the new meanings inherent in the research itself. As I recognize how my views have changed due to the insights gleaned in this research process, this recognition itself helps bind the research narrative together and provides a unity of structure both for the stories of the participants and for my own narrative as they are woven together and describe the experiences of Social Studies 30 teachers in a high-stakes environment.

Hermeneutical conversations as method of research

In this study, I engage four teachers in hermeneutic conversations revealing their experiences teaching in high-stakes testing environments. Engaging in hermeneutic conversation is a co-operative approach to research that provides for a generation and sharing of knowledge between those involved in the conversation and which also allows co-emergent meanings to emerge (Carson, 1986). In further explanation of this type of research method, Feldman (1999) describes the characteristics of conversational research as a conversation between or among people in which both are co-participants. It is a cooperative venture with a direction given to the conversation. As a result of the conversation, new understandings arise. This dialogue consists of connected remarks in which the contributions of both participants are mutually dependent. Both must be considered partners in this joint activity.

Gadamer (1975) indicates that a genuine conversation does not lie within the will of either partner but rather takes its own twists and reaches its own conclusion. The participants do not know what will ultimately emerge from the conversation. The hermeneutic circle is an active component of conversational research in that, as understandings provide structure to the conversation, the conversation itself creates new understandings. A conversation produces new and unique understandings that shape the participants responses and the direction of the conversation. "All conversations result in new understandings for all participants" (Feldman, 1999, p. 136). These co-created understandings have epistemic value in that knowledge is created, the product of this dialogic activity.

Carson (1986) further describes the characteristics of conversational research asserting that it does not have linear logic but rather has the appearance of "discursus" or a running from place to place. It is poetic in style and rejects the positivist bent for proof and assertions. Instead, through a profusion of examples, references and recollections, understanding emerges through the conversation. This friendly and natural form of research is amicable rather than authoritative and allows for co-emergent meaning to be created. "Conversational research…makes possible a deeper understanding of the reality of our situations as educators" (Carson, 1986, p. 84). Individuals' attitudes, beliefs and values emerge from the conversations.

Carson's description of conversational research illuminates the difference between this method of inquiry and what he calls the traditional data-gathering technique of interviewing. In the traditional form, the interview is designed to elicit information which is of relevance to the researcher but not necessarily to the person being interviewed. Conversational research embraces both parties as co- participants and provides meaning and relevance to all involved. The information gleaned is of central importance to both discussants engaged in the conversation in the fact that both glean meaning and understanding about their relationship to the topic at hand. The researcher is attempting to understand the participant's perspective and ways of making meaning (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994), while the participant is also endeavouring an understanding of how the revelations about self impact their very being.

It is the conversation that is evocative of lived experience and which reveals a complexity of reactions, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, assumptions, prejudgements, and presuppositions (van Manen, 1977) along with ambiguities, confusion, variety and paradox. These all enable teachers to locate meanings that they place on the events, processes and structures of their lives and to connect these meanings to the social world around them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, an authentic mosaic of perceptions and thoughts is produced.

The conversation between researcher and participant evokes the lived experience of both, with the aim of shared understandings. This conversation offers the opportunity to be known, to increase self-understanding, to share something with the other, as well as the prospect to delight in the intersubjective nature of human understanding. In asking someone to participate in this type of research, we are, in a sense, extending an invitation to conversation and the researcher becomes an integral participant within the research which allows the conversation to be as one human being to another so that it confirms the other. The researcher is genuinely present, committed and open to the participant as well as allowing meaning from one's own experience to emerge in the conversation. Thus the researcher is fully implicated in the research project, also.

The most important personal characteristic for a researcher employing the method of hermeneutic conversation is a genuine interest in the people they are engaging in the interpretive inquiry and they must communicate this acceptance and interest throughout the conversational process (Seidman, 1991; Ellis, 1998). It is imperative to realize that other people's self-narratives are important in and of themselves and that they offer something to their own. Other's stories are to be valued highly and not viewed instrumentally merely as good sources of data. In the same way, a researcher's own narratives are vital in the conversation to help create co-emergent meanings.

The art of questioning within a conversational research model revolves around the lived experience of the participants. The hermeneutic researcher may ask only one general question at the beginning (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994) or have a select few open-ended questions that can be referred to but which are only used as a guide. Open-ended questions establish the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants. They do not presume an answer (Seidman, 1991). This openness allows the meaning to emerge through the language. Carson (1986) posits that it is necessary for the openness of the question be preserved and not cut off by rapidly forming opinions and conclusions. This dialogic relationship will present surprises and unexpected insights. Mishler (1986) stresses that one should allow respondents to continue in their own way until they indicate they have finished their answer. By doing this, their own narratives are more likely to emerge. While showing interest and acceptance with follow-up questions, the researcher must also convey an impression of relaxed conversation with no need to rush or say everything in one day (Ellis, 1998).

The conversations with my research participants have allowed me to develop a fuller understanding of how teachers are impacted by high-stake examinations. The conversations the accounts are based on were not one-sided, as I fully interacted as a participant in the conversations. This contrasts to studies where data is gathered from the participants by a detached researcher. In these dialogues, both the teacher-participants and I allowed our fore-structure and experiences to influence and flow through the conversation. Knowledge was mutually shared and neither I nor the other discussants intentionally directed the meanings and understandings which unfolded from the conversations. Participants contributed in an equal manner throughout the conversations which allowed for ambiguity and uncertainty but also provided the opportunity for a rich narrative to emerge in which we (the researcher-participant and the teacher-participants) were able to explore our understandings of what it means to teach in the high-stakes environment created by the diploma examination requirements. .

Purpose and efficacy of the study

The purpose of my research was to attempt an understanding of whether the provincially-mandated examinations create conditions which impact the practice of the teacher in the classroom. From my own experience in the Social Studies 30 classroom, and in discussion with other teachers who have shared this experience, this conclusion seems to be commonly held. The study therefore is concerned not so much as to whether teachers are impacted but rather with how teachers experience the high-stakes environment of preparing students for the diploma examinations and what impact the tests have on their pedagogy.

The research could be considered ontological in nature as it is a meaningful inquiry into what it means "to be" a teacher in a high-stakes testing environment. The value of the research is revealed in the attempt to develop a clearer understanding of who we are as teachers and how this translates into our pedagogical practice. Teachers' voices were heard, which allowed for a more complete understanding of how our being is affected, positively or negatively, by the examination requirements. This understanding allowed us as teachers to explore our professional identities and discuss how we relate to the conditions which affect us.

The hermeneutical approach which guided this study allowed for self-reflexivity, which provided a clearer understanding of the mutual effects as they relate to each of the participants as well as myself. Carson (1986) notes that autobiographical reflection or reflexivity is an important aspect of conversational research such as this. Not only were the participant teacher's voices heard but I am clearly implicated in the research also. As a co-participant in the conversations, my own experience contributed to the overall understandings and meanings which emerged from our dialogue. Meaning was constructed as all participants, including myself, engaged in the conversations. Participation in the study has provided the participant-teachers with a more complete understanding of how these examinations impact our practice and our very selves.

The research not only captures the lived reality of the participant teachers in the high-stakes assessment environment but also has larger implications by helping other social studies teachers understand more clearly how an externally-imposed examination may cause them to change their teaching practices and possibly their very being through the process of resonance of experience. In most cases teachers do not have direct input into the development of the externally-mandated examinations required of the students. Many teachers fear their pedagogic practices may be scrutinized, with possible negative consequences resulting if the students perform poorly on the tests. As a result, teachers may choose to "teach to the test" so as to ensure adequate results for their students as well as protecting themselves from scrutiny. On the other hand, some teachers may see that while they do not have full-opportunity to aid in the development of these examinations, the rigour required of both student and teacher provides a positive atmosphere in which to ensure all the curricular requirements are met. It may also afford a sense of accomplishment in the preparation of students for further high-stake expectations.

With this in mind, it is important to note that each participant's story is different, yet connected by common themes. As Jalongo and Isenberg (1995) claim, teacher narratives which are woven together or in the same context as other teachers will connect them to the lives of many different teachers. Potentially, this connectivity will also have broader implications as pre-service teachers consider participating in this type of environment or for current teachers who may be considering leaving the profession because of the pressures. School and district administrators will also glean insight from the study and will be able to determine the level of support they give to the diploma examination process. Another consideration which teachers, administrators as well as governmental policy developers must consider is the impact that the mandated examinations have on the teaching practices of social studies teachers and whether this context allows for a complete discussion of all curricular expectations rather than only those that may appear on the Alberta diploma examination.

An important point regarding the research is that it has entered relative *terra incognita*. Very few studies focus on the impact of high-stakes testing on the pedagogical practices of teachers within the Alberta context, especially in the subject discipline of social studies. In a general call for reform, The Committee on Public Education and Professional Practice of the Alberta Teachers' Association (1994) appealed for changes regarding assessment and urged that the main goal of evaluation be to assist the learning process. The report also recommended that "ease of evaluation should not drive the objectives of teaching nor should standardized tests drive the activities of the classroom" (p. 16). Implication for change within the educational system is possible if the study is considered by the power brokers and decision-makers within the school systems across Alberta.

The participants

The participants in the research were teachers currently engaged in teaching Social Studies 30 in Alberta. I felt it was important to survey a varied spectrum of experience so my initial goal was to hold conversations with several different teachers whose experience offers a variety of perspectives. While the background of each teacher will subsequently be described in detail in Chapters Five through Eight, the following brief sketch of each describes the type of teacher I desired to be involved in the research with the hope of providing a broad survey of experience and background.

My aim was to have one teacher with extensive experience teaching this course, who also has participated in the grading of the essay component of the diploma examination and has also helped develop the multiple-choice questions by having served on item-building teams. This person would provide a perspective from a teacher who is intimately involved with all aspects of the assessment from question generation, to preparation of students writing the examination and also from someone who has experience in the evaluation of the written response. This individual was also to provide a viewpoint of a veteran teacher who knows exactly what the examination process entails and how it impacts classroom pedagogy. I was fortunate that Mike, a veteran teacher with over 20 years of experience and whose narrative is explored in Chapter Eight, agreed to be involved in the research.

I planned to include an individual in the research with a wide-range of teaching experience who only recently had been assigned the task of teaching a class in which the diploma examination in social studies is required. An understanding of how a professional who is proficient in his or her craft, but who must adapt to the conditions of the examination was insightful in allowing both the researcher as well as the participant to assess how one's pedagogy changed when one was required to prepare students for a high-stakes examination. Sarah was an ideal choice for this category because of her background of teaching a variety of subjects, as well as social studies, and I felt privileged to have her join the research project. Her story unfolds in Chapter Five.

I also wanted an individual with experience in the Social Studies 30 classroom and the attendant diploma examinations, who also had worked with Alberta Learning in curricular or assessment development. He or she would know the inner workings of the governmental evaluation structure as well as the philosophy and rationale behind what drives it. This individual would be able to provide a perspective of one who has been involved the diploma examinations from both sides. Bill participated in the research and brought a wealth of experience and information from both a teacher's viewpoint as well as that of a member of the new provincial social studies curriculum development committee. Bill's narrative is captured in Chapter Six. Sarah also supplemented Bill's experience by having worked with Alberta Learning in curriculum development.

Initially, my plan was to have a participant new to the teaching profession as well as to teaching social studies at the grade 12 level. An understanding of how high-stakes examinations challenge his or her developing pedagogical practices was intended to help develop a clearer picture of how a new teacher initially aligns his or her teaching to what is perceived to be mandated from Alberta Learning in regard to the diploma examination. This individual would provide a picture of how this experience influences the teaching of social studies as well as how it impacts themselves personally as a new teacher. I was stymied in my attempt to find a relatively new teacher at the Social Studies 30 level because the school districts and the schools themselves that I contacted indicated that they did not have anyone on staff in that category. After inquiring why this was the case, the response was that a new teacher was not given the assignment to teach a diploma examination course during his or her first few years of teaching. Districts felt teachers needed to have classroom experience before they faced the high-stakes environment of classes with a diploma examination component.

In lieu of this individual, I turned my attention to finding an individual who did not have connections to the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA). I was interested in finding out if there was any impact, either positive or negative, by not being involved with either the political or professional components of the ATA, and if a teacher without these connections experiences teaching in a high-stakes environment differently than those without these support structures. I was fortunate to enlist Scott who teaches in an independent school where ATA membership was not required. His agreeing to be a research participant provided this added insight. Scott's story is found in Chapter Seven. As it turned out, Bill was not a member of the ATA either so there was an even balance of participants who were either members or not members of the teachers' association.

Description of the conversations

The in-depth conversations consisted of six sessions with each of the four other teachers, in which various levels of meaning were explored. Each conversation was approximately one to one-and-a-half hours in length. These six dialogues spanned a sixteen-week period. The first conversation was conducted as a focus group session where the social studies philosophical approaches including the spectrums of transmission of knowledge versus active participation along with content versus process were discussed. The first individual dialogue inquired into the teacher's general experience as well as how they became involved in teaching social studies. Here, each teacher was afforded the opportunity to share an artefact of his or her choice which illustrated teaching socials studies within the high-stakes context of the diploma examination program. I also brought an artefact from my teaching experience to ensure I was a full participant in the conversation. The second individual conversation explored our own experience of teaching social studies in a high-stakes environment and the resultant impact on teacher identity. The last individual conversational session explored the effect that the high-stakes diploma examination has on teaching practice in this milieu.

The second focus group conversation explored issues surrounding the diploma examination itself and whether the examination should be scrapped in favour of alternate forms of assessment or, if the examination was maintained, what changes could be made to make it more effective. The final focus group meeting was a "grand" conversation where all participants were able to summarize how we experienced teaching a course in which a high-stakes examination was required. We also reviewed how the diploma examination, as well as the published examination results, impacted our teaching identity. These focus group sessions allowed for a deep reflection to occur individually as well as collectively. It was insightful to embrace the emergence of new meanings as we engaged each other's ideas throughout our conversations. The conversations allowed for a space of critical reflection on our own practices as well as an opportunity for professional development.

Analysis

Analysis of the data entailed a thorough and careful listening to the language of the teachers. All conversations were recorded and transcribed. Transcription allowed for a careful interpretation and deconstruction of what was related, not only in regards to pedagogical practice but also beliefs, hopes, goals, frustrations, and attitudes as they relate to the externally mandated assessment. Morse (1994) indicates that a careful listening and comprehension of the conversations allows for a rich, detailed description of each participant's narrative. This study it has also afforded an opportunity to more completely grasp how and what I experienced when I taught in a high-stakes environment. The participants' experience and stories merged into a fuller comprehension of what it is like to teach in a stressful environment and how our pedagogical practices are altered because of the mandated examination.

An integral part of data analysis is the notion of triangulation, or the use of multiple sources of data or methods to confirm the findings, which ensures the integrity of the inferences one draws from the data (Schwandt, 2001). Merriam (1998) posits that this notion, while taken from positivist research methods, can be applied in qualitative studies if the researcher relies on a holistic understanding of the situation to construct plausible explanations about the phenomena under study. Triangulation was achieved through several methods. These included analyzing the data that emerged from the conversations, along with having each participant, including myself, keep a reflective journal to record personal thoughts, reflections and observations which arose from the conversations. Another source of triangulation of the data was the final "grand" conversation where all participants were able to discuss themes from earlier conversations. This, as well as comments from the reflective journal, provided an opportunity for exchange of ideas and also for deep reflection. A final form of triangulation was achieved when drafts of the analysis chapters were sent to each respective participant to ensure that my written descriptions of each experience were appropriately portrayed. These multiple methods and data sources helped ensure the integrity of the inferences drawn about the data.

Conclusion

This qualitative interpretive inquiry provides an opportunity to understand how high-stakes examinations and, specifically, the diploma examinations in social studies within the province of Alberta, impact the lived realities of teachers and their pedagogical practices. Philosophical hermeneutics informs this study and the conversational research method allowed me as researcher and the other teacher participants to meet on an equitable basis eliminating the perception that the researcher holds control and power. These teacher-participants represented a spectrum of experience helping students prepare for the diploma examination. The impact on their teaching practice, as well as that of my own personal experience with this phenomenon, is explored in detail in the following narrative chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Social Studies 30 Program of Study

A description of the Alberta Social Studies 30 Program of Study and a discussion of the format of the diploma examination will provide a background to aid in understanding the curricular requirements and assessment expectations that a Social Studies 30 teacher faces. The narratives of each individual teacher will be enhanced as they are set against this backdrop.

> Alberta Education is responsible for determining what students are expected to learn from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The department works with its stakeholders to design curriculum and provide authorized resources that meet the needs of learners and educators. Alberta Education also decides the amount of instructional time spent on each subject area. (Alberta Education, 2005)

Social studies is required throughout the elementary, junior high and secondary levels with curricular requirements outlined through the Program of Studies developed by Alberta Education. The goal of the curriculum is to develop responsible citizens through the education of the individual student as well as provide for a positive future for both student as well as society. The disciplines of history, geography, economics, and other social sciences, combined with the humanities, form the social studies curriculum. At the secondary level, which includes grades 10, 11 and 12, there are two options for social studies. The 10-20-30 stream is for students whose intent it is to advance to university level, post-secondary studies and the 13-23-33 stream is required for students who want to graduate with a high-school diploma. This sequence of courses does not provide the opportunity for university entrance. Therefore, while Social Studies 33 also has a diploma examination, the same intensity of high-stakes examinations is not present as in the Social Studies 30 course. For this reason, the research focuses only on the 30-level course.

Social Studies 30 is divided into two equal components based on the theme "The Contemporary World." The first section, Topic A: Political and Economic Systems, provides a theoretical as well as a historical survey of the dominant political and economic systems during the twentieth century. The second section, Topic B: Global Interaction is a historical review of the major world nations' relations during the last century. Starting with the peace treaties that concluded World War I, the curricular material covers major historical world events and brings the student to the present time with a current events component. Levels of knowledge objectives are specified with generalizations and key understandings supported by concepts as well as related facts and content. Along with the knowledge component of the curriculum, process, communication and participation skills are integrated throughout. These include an emphasis on critical and creative thinking, and issue-based inquiry. As a preface to each topic within the Social Studies 30 Program of Study, the following statement regarding instructional organization is made to guide teachers in their pedagogical approaches in relation to curricular expectations.

> In order to provide a clear statement of what students are expected to learn about this topic, the content has been organized into knowledge, skill and attitude objectives. However, for instructional purposes, the knowledge, skill and attitude objectives are to be incorporated into an organizational

> model for teaching the topic. Flexibility in selecting and designing an instructional organization for the unit is intended to accommodate the needs of students, maximize the use of available resources, and allow for coordination of instructional planning. Consequently, the knowledge, skill and attitude objectives should be integrated for instructional purposes, not taught in an isolated fashion. It is intended that each topic should receive equal emphasis in the course. Equal weighting should be given to knowledge and skill objectives in each topic. Attitude objectives should be addressed throughout the topic. Assessment of attitude objectives should not be used in calculating grades.
>
> (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 42)

The assessment structure of the diploma examination

The diploma examination in Social Studies 30 is divided into two sections with students writing each section on a different day of the examination period. Part A consists of an essay section in which the students are required to write one essay from a choice of two. The choices represent an issue from either Topic A or Topic B of the curriculum. The overall weighting of the essay component is 30% of the examination mark with each student being evaluated on four components: Exploration of the Issue (5%), Defence of Position (10%), Quality of Examples (10%) and Quality of Language and Expression (5%).

> Students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the issue under discussion and defend a position on that issue through the application of supporting evidence. Arguments should be persuasive and show evidence

> of logical thought. Students are expected to make use of critical and creative thinking skills to demonstrate complexity and independence of thought.
>
> (Alberta Education, 2005)

Part B of the examination consists of 70 multiple-choice questions and is weighted at 70% of the examination mark. The questions are based on the curricular components of the Program of Study and vary in levels of difficulty. The goal of Alberta Education is to have the questions assess both a knowledge component of the curriculum and also apply process skills to the knowledge base (Alberta Education, 2005). The multiple choice section is evenly divided between Topic A and Topic B with 35 questions based on each topic.

English language arts and social studies are the only disciplines requiring all students to write a diploma examination to receive a high-school diploma. Those students who intended to continue their studies at university-level post-secondary institutions, may also be required, depending on the program of interest, to take examinations in sciences and mathematics. But the requirement for all university-bound students to take the Social Studies 30 diploma examination makes it distinctive, along with English language arts, as a common expectation for all students continuing into post-secondary studies.

Students' final course marks are determined through an equal blending of the mark received throughout the course with their mark on the diploma examination. Thus, the mark on the examination constitutes 50% of the overall mark. A student may still pass the course, while not passing the examination or vice-versa; but, in reality, the chances for acceptance into university is diminished if the student does not pass both components of the course with more than a marginal mark in the course and the diploma examination. Exceptions for mature students are made so that they can write the examination without the corresponding class instruction. In this case, the final examination mark constitutes 100% of the final mark.

The diploma examination program does include classroom teachers in both the development of the examination as well as in evaluation of the students. Social Studies 30 teachers can become involved in the diploma examination process outside the classroom in several significant ways. The most common form of participation is by being recommended by a superintendent to be a marker of the essay component of the examination. For each administration of the diploma examination, approximately 150-170 teachers are selected from all across the province to mark the essays over several days. Several reliability reviews are scheduled throughout the marking sessions to ensure consistency of marking. These involve comparing one's own marking against a pre-set standard. Becoming a marker helps a teacher develop a much clearer understanding of the elements of the essays. Usually this opportunity is viewed as a valuable professional development experience.

Teachers may also, upon recommendation, be members of item-building teams. These teams develop the multiple-choice questions used in the diploma examination. Questions are vetted through a series of pilot-testing projects throughout the province and only questions that meet certain criteria are used for the test. Again, teachers involved in the item-building process develop a more in-depth understanding of the multiple-choice component. Teachers may also be asked to pilot the multiple-choice questions in their classrooms. This provides the teacher with a test bank of questions to use and allows for an evaluation to occur regarding the quality of questions and their usability on future examinations.

The construction metaphor

The following chapters provide narratives of how four Social Studies 30 teachers, along with my own narrative inter-woven throughout, experience teaching in the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination along with a description of how the examination impacts pedagogy and teaching identity. At the same time I was researching and writing the narratives, my wife and I contracted a house to be built for our family. Primarily attending to the research project I was fascinated watching the house building project proceed. It was amazing how a beautiful structure was constructed out of a combination of raw materials and expert craftsmanship. I observed striking parallels between what the various professionals in the construction industry are required to do and what teachers in general, and Social Studies 30 teachers in particular, are required to do to ensure the completion of a high-quality product or program. Through an exploration of each participant's experience, along with my own, it became evident that an appropriate metaphor for our experiences could be found in the world of construction.

Just as an architect prepares comprehensive plans for buildings, the Social Studies 30 teacher must also prepare the pedagogical blueprint of what will transpire in the classroom to develop as strong a program as possible in an attempt to guarantee maximum success by the students on the diploma examination. The importance of the plan is intensified within the context of high-stakes examinations. Teachers of classes without a mandated assessment component have more liberties to create a curricular master plan which is much more flexible and which meets the individual interests of the students to a greater degree. Elements may be introduced that support the curriculum in divergent ways or provide for unique pedagogical approaches or student interest in non-diploma classes. The context of high-stakes standardized examinations in the Social Studies 30 course, in particular, diminishes the teacher's options to do this. The teacher must follow the prescribed curriculum with an extreme diligence and create a pedagogical program that ensures students receive the knowledge necessary to perform to the demands imposed by the test.

Besides playing the role of architect, a teacher must also embody the expertise of an engineer. Just as an engineer is required to meet all building standards, the teacher must ensure that all curricular standards are being met so that the enacted program of studies is as close to the prescribed curriculum as possible. When dealing with social studies curricula, this has interesting implications. The knowledge, skills and attitudes called for in the Alberta social studies curriculum and specifically in the Social Studies 30 program, with its accompanying mandated assessment component, can be somewhat contradictory. An attempt to interpret the divergent meanings of responsible citizenship along with the ambiguity of process skills such as critical and creative thinking and problem-solving, and then to address how they can be adequately be assessed, is difficult for a teacher in this setting to accomplish. Still, the knowledge along with the appropriate skills must be addressed with enough specificity and precision to provide student success on the standardized examination. Thus the engineer of the classroom educational program is required to meld the ambiguities of the curriculum with the precision of diploma examination assessment standards.

To accomplish this task effectively, the teacher must function in the role of builder as well. Here the expectations are to execute the plans and specifications outlined in the architectural and engineering requirements and fuse them into a program that will incorporate these elements into a well-built body of instruction. Just as the end result of a construction project with an expert builder is one of a well-built structure, so the end result of a pedagogical construction project will be a curricular and pedagogically sound program which prepares students for expectations of the curriculum as well as the demands of the standardized assessment. To interfuse all these elements into a teacher's class requires the art of an architect, the expertise of an engineer and the competent skill of a master craftsperson and expert builder.

The intent of this research project has been to interpret the lived realities of Social Studies 30 teachers as they are required to fulfill each of these roles with precision. The following narratives attempt to accurately represent the experiences of the research participants as they have accepted the demands of teaching in a high-stakes environment, specifically Social Studies 30, as well as provide a description of the impact on their pedagogical practices. I, as the researcher, must admit my own complicity in the interpretation of these narratives. I am fully implicated through the exploration of my own experience in teaching Social Studies 30 and the comparison of my own journey with each participant as my story weaves throughout the narratives of the others. Collectively, the versions of what it is like to teach in this high-stakes environment meld together and speak to the pleasures, pains, joys, frustrations, affirmations and irritations of those professionals who take up the challenge to teach in this context.

These narratives have emerged from conversations held with four Social Studies 30 teachers over a period of time stretching from June through October, 2004. The participants had opportunity to converse with me during three individual settings. They also discussed issues as a whole group three times as well. The conversations wandered through the issues that arise from being a pedagogue assigned to teach the Social Studies 30 course and prepare students for the diploma examination. Questions surrounding teacher identity and lived realities swirled throughout our conversations. Are the experiences and changes in teaching methods positive or negative in the lives of the teachers? What feelings or emotions emerge from this experience? Are the tensions in this course dissimilar to other courses? Do we teach our other courses differently? What tends to be ignored or emphasized due to the presence of the examination? These questions, along with a multitude of concomitant queries, illustrate the attempt to interpret our own experiences in this environment and the impact on our teaching methods that the diploma examination has on a Social Studies 30 teacher.

Along with the conversations, each participant, including myself, kept a reflective journal, which helped us analyze our thoughts more thoroughly and contemplatively. Combined, these expressions of our own experiences provide the story of each one of us, as we encounter ourselves and our students in the midst of the expectations of the mandated examination.

All the participants teach in rural or small town settings. This fact enabled us to explore teaching experience within this context since the voice of this segment of the teaching population has not always been attended to. The rural context allowed for an exploration of what it is like to teach in settings where one may not have the luxury of being a member of a large social studies department found in urban schools or have the privilege to rely on the variety of expertise found in such a setting. Two participants teach within a relatively small social studies department and two participants came from schools in which they were the only Social Studies 30 teacher.

Several themes emerged as a result of an analysis of the transcribed conversations. Each teacher's individual background was investigated along with the positives and negatives experienced in teaching Socials 30. Conversations revolved around teaching attributes as well as feelings and attitudes towards the exams. The motif of tension as a result of the expectations of teaching a class with the mandated assessment was also discussed. Impacts on pedagogy emerged throughout our conversations along with the topic of the (re)organization of teaching methods required in this class. Sub-themes also arose and will be discussed in the following chapters within the context of the conversations.

As one considers the experiences of each teacher, understanding is enhanced through consideration of an appropriate metaphor which parallels the process that teachers experience in creating an exemplary pedagogical program. Each teacher, when placed in the pressurized milieu of teaching within the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30, must construct a program that exhibits curricular and pedagogical soundness, not only to maximize each student's opportunity but also to meet expectations placed on the teacher by students, parents, and administrators at various levels and by the teacher him or herself. Each teacher-participant has mastered the architectural, the engineering and the building components of a consummate professional. They have developed pedagogical approaches to maximize the potential of the students they teach as they assist in preparation for the diploma examination. To provide variety and also to explore each participant's narrative from a slightly different angle, their stories will be emphasized in such a way as to provide a view into their teaching lives from one of the viewpoints of architect, engineer, craftsman and builder. This does not in any way indicate that they have not achieved mastery in each of the other areas.

CHAPTER FIVE:
SARAH – THE REFLECTIVE ARCHITECT

Background

Sarah is a teacher in a comprehensive high school in a rural Albertan town. She has taught in the same school for several years. Her intent even as a child was to become a teacher and she envisioned following one of her passions and specializing in music education. In our conversations, she used the term "change" as the metaphor for her career. Although she entered her teacher education program as a special education major after taking an English course, in her first year she changed her major to English. During her student teaching experience she was encouraged to teach French classes as well. These French courses actually helped her gain her first teaching position. After teaching several years there, she and her husband went overseas to teach. Upon return to Alberta, she took a short hiatus from the classroom as a result of having "a series of babies" (Conversation 1, 10/8/2004).

Upon return to the teaching profession, she was assigned a position mostly teaching French; but, "social studies came to me by chance, 10 years into my career" (Sarah's reflective journal) as this position had a social studies class attached to it. Sarah was surprised that she enjoyed the social studies class as much as she did, since she had detested history classes as a student. Over the years, first by surprising herself as she enjoyed a political science course in university, and then through realizing the connections between the English curriculum and historical narratives, she was willing to give the social studies class a try.

After the challenge of the first year of teaching social studies, Sarah made the serendipitous discovery that social studies embodied her interests and indeed her passion.

Her current position includes teaching French immersion classes which requires her to teach the French version of Social Studies 30. Being the only teacher with this assignment in the school, Sarah views it as a privilege to work with immersion students through their entire senior high-school experience. Sarah has been in her current teaching assignment for several years and, while she enjoys the other classes that she teaches, the social studies classes provide the most interest and professional satisfaction and she feels that she has discovered her niche.

> I love the combination of rich, dynamic content, possibilities for student involvement and engagement, applicability to current events and scope for dialog, study and debate. I get very energized by students who display passion in social studies, and very frequently, my students spur me on to further reading or research.
>
> (Sarah's reflective journal)

It is interesting to compare and contrast Sarah's coming to teaching and social studies with my own experience. Unlike Sarah, I had not initially planned to be a teacher. However, after having made that decision and after several teaching positions, I also ended up in the curricular area that I personally enjoy the most – secondary social studies. It was also a circuitous route to my own area of interest and, as Sarah experienced, I was eventually drawn to the curricular area that appealed to me both personally and professionally. Social studies has allowed me to express myself more completely than any other curricular area. As I reflect on this, I find it interesting because early in my teaching career I wanted to become a math teacher, trying to avoid the ambiguities inherent in social studies. Over time, I have come to embrace this aspect and enjoy it much more than the certainties which I once perceived as advantages of mathematics.

My first acquaintance with Sarah was at an Alberta Learning sponsored curriculum development project. In our conversations, I described my research to her and she expressed interest in the topic so I invited her to be a participant and she accepted. Because she was from a rural area, I asked if she could provide names of other individuals who also taught in rural schools and who she felt would be interested in participating in the research. Fortunately Mike, one name she suggested, became a participant. As a part of our first conversation, Sarah indicated that she has had opportunities to work helping develop curriculum for the new social studies program in Alberta which has provided her with an insider's view of the expectations and intentions of the curriculum branch regarding social studies. She is excited at the way the new curriculum is being developed and feels privileged to be a part of the process.

My first formal research meeting with Sarah was during the focus group which brought together all four participants involved in this project. Because of some scheduling difficulties, the first meeting took place at the end of the school year when teachers were pre-occupied with completion of courses, final examinations and showing evidence of the fatigue of a demanding school year. I was delighted that Sarah and her fellow participants were so amiable in setting aside an hour during this hectic time to begin the process of conversations. Even with the attendant demands of the conclusion of the school year, a mutual sense of interest in the project was expressed. A discussion of approaches to social studies and assessment set the stage for the future conversations.

At this meeting I distributed a document with possible questions for the next sessions. It dealt with the issues around high-stakes assessment in Social Studies 30.

These questions were used as discussion starters for our conversations (see Appendix A).

However, our conversations were not simply tied to a list of questions. Instead, as Carson (1986) describes, our conversations took the form of "discursus" or a running from place to place through these issues. This allowed for the emergence of the experience of each individual and an exchange of views about how their pedagogical practices are impacted by the presence of the diploma examination.

Following this initial focus group session, the individual conversations between Sarah and myself began during the summer of 2004 when the demands of the classroom were not as pressing. Our first conversation, which lasted approximately an hour, took place in an office conducive to privacy and the requisite recording of the session. Approximately a week and a half later, our next individual conversation took place in the same office still during the summer break although it was approaching the time that preparation for the new school year was to take place. The impending pressures of the start of the school term did not detract from our conversations regarding how Social Studies 30 teachers experience the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination. The last individual conversation occurred one month after this, and about two weeks into the new school year. Again the stresses of starting a new school year did not in any way seem to affect a stimulating discussion on the impact of Sarah's pedagogical practice. The second and third focus group meetings took place approximately a week before this last individual session with Sarah and two weeks after it respectively.

It was evident that, during all these conversations, Sarah came with interest and that she was prepared to reflect carefully on her own practice. Her emphasis on being reflective became evident as the conversations continued. By carefully reflecting on her own teaching, Sarah was illustrating the importance she places on this principle of professional development. In becoming more aware of her own practice with the intent to become a more confident and informed educational decision maker (Farrell, 2000) she realized that she can more readily handle the complex and unpredictable problems that she faces with confidence, skill and care (Schon, 1983, 1986). Throughout the conversations, both Sarah and I encountered the hermeneutic experience that Pinar (2005) describes, "In the sounds of our conversation we honour the past by self-reflectively reformulating it in the present, animated by our own and others' 'true human presence' " (p. 82).

Experiencing the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30

Personal pedagogical identity

To facilitate our conversations regarding teaching identity and how we saw ourselves as teachers, I had asked each of the teachers to bring an artefact to our first individual conversation. Following Sumara's (1994) example of using literary texts as artefacts to be explored and which "sometimes takes us to unexpected places" (p.3), I transferred the notion of literary text as artefact to any teaching device, text or other, to help explore our teaching selves. The artefact was to be something that illustrated our approach to teaching, and in a sense, also indicated how we saw our own teaching identity.

As she introduced her artefact, Sarah indicated the type of teacher she strives to be. The artefact was a series of learning centres where students could experience cooperative learning while still achieving the expectations of the curriculum. "I believe quite firmly that what kids will learn the best is what they've discussed or played with a little bit themselves and sort of found a way to understand a little bit themselves so I try to marry that belief with this course" (Conversation 1, 10/8/2004). As we discussed group work and cooperative learning, Sarah indicated that she found less opportunity to use this approach in Social Studies 30 than in other social studies classes, not so much due to the expectations of the examination but rather because of the volume of information that must be covered in the curriculum. In contrast to Sarah's learning centres, I presented one of the two prescribed textbooks for Social Studies 30, *Global Forces of the Twentieth Century* (Mitchner & Tuffs, 1991) as my artefact. I felt it revealed my teaching identity in this course. I held the firm belief that, if I ensured I covered everything out of the text that may be on the diploma examination, then I would be providing the necessary information to the students so they could perform well on the examination. I relied on the textbook much more closely in this course than in any other social studies course that I taught. As I reflect back I see it becoming an integral extension of my teaching identity.

As we continued to talk, it became obvious that one of Sarah's foremost concerns as she plans her teaching program was the well-being of her students. Her empathetic approach was infused throughout her plans and translated into her teaching. The statement, "I am a very warm teacher, and work hard to meet my students' needs" (Sarah's reflective journal) vividly describes her approach in the Socials 30 classroom as well as the other classes that she teaches. Empathy effuses from all she does, from the planning stages, through the teaching and then through the reflection of practice.

> …it makes me think of some students who you know almost never do particularly well on exams and there are a host of reasons and those are the ones that I really feel for with this diploma exam. If they had every test

> that they have ever done for you no higher than mark "x", they pretty much know that they don't have much hope of getting much higher than mark "x" on their diploma exam and they are the ones that I really, really feel for. I've seen that and because I teach my kids so many courses, I've often seen somebody who is really poor on tests but expresses themselves orally really well. They are really good at the projects, presentations and whatever, so I find that hard to watch.
>
> (Conversation 3, 20/9/2004)

Empathy translates into action as Sarah will encourage students to come during lunch breaks and after school for extra help. She often makes this offer but is saddened that not as many students who could benefit actually participate. This parallels my own practice in that I would also provide out-of-class time to help any student who needed extra assistance but also usually received a paucity of response to this offer. This also often troubled and frustrated me, since the students did not want to benefit from an opportunity to improve. Both Sarah and I extended invitations that seldom were accepted.

Reflective practitioner

An understanding emerged out of our conversations of how Sarah considers the process of teaching as a cycle of planning, teaching, and evaluating. The cycle is fully completed upon reflection on practice to enhance future engagement with the other three pedagogical activities. Throughout our conversations, I was consistently impressed that Sarah's teaching identity was clarified as she ensured her teaching practice was solidly based on reflection. She illustrated this clearly as she described her quest to develop understandings of and adopt current or emerging theories and practices. Sarah indicated that she had read academic treatises on current issues such as Alfie Kohn's (2004, 1996) works on high-stakes testing. It is evident that she takes it upon herself to be conversant in the areas that affect her practice, especially in the area of assessment. She also likes how the examination keeps her "on her toes" as it requires a knowledge and understanding of current affairs. Additionally, she intentionally ties her Socials 10 and 20 classes together to the 30 class so that the students are exposed to the skills and the knowledge base that they will need to succeed in writing the diploma examination.

In our conversations, the concept of using the results as a self-examination of our own teaching emerged. In response to a question along these lines, Sarah indicated strongly that is certainly a part of her reflective practice.

> Absolutely. And I am glad to have the tool to do it. There is always a certain level of concern of how did they do? That is the first question. And the second question, how many met the level of excellence or whatever. And then there is, did Johnny get through? So there are those big global things, but I do very much look at it as an examination. I tend to be a person who will take responsibility and ownership for everything, whether I need to or not. So sometimes, after I have blamed myself that students didn't do well on question 72, then I sit back and think, 'OK, but why and is it possible that there are other factors?' And I think that is a good thing to do because as the professional that is being paid to be there, if my students haven't done well, there should be something that I can do to help them do better there. So I like that tool.
>
> (Conversation 3, 20/9/2004)

In my own experience, I eagerly awaited the results. As I reviewed how each student did and how the class answered the multiple-choice questions I would assiduously compare my program with the results and try and emphasize the areas that appeared weak. I believed that not only could I help the students do better, but also improve my pedagogical practice. Throughout the semester I would continually note areas that needed added emphasis with the hopes of improving student scores and my own competence.

Alberta Learning has recently changed its practice and now publishes the students' results according to teacher. Sarah views this as an excellent way of using the results as a diagnostic tool to assist in developing the plans for her future classes, and feels very positive that it is enabling her to become a more proficient pedagogue.

> …it is then finally a diagnostic kind of a tool rather than an overall, 'Hey, I feel good' or an overall 'Hey, I feel crummy'. 'Hey I really feel good about this aspect' and I really think that we need to be reflective practitioners and it is very hard to do that with just a percentage, but if you know that on this certain type of question, your students did either well or poorly, there you have something to actually work with, so I think that is a really strong thing.
>
> (Conversation 3, 20/9/2004)

Sarah also sees Alberta Learning's encouragement of reflective practice as positive.

> I think we are lucky. More and more of Alberta Learning's mandate is to be doing some professional enhancement plans and various schools take

> those however they want to, and so sometimes you are lucky enough to be in a department where you are actually discussing how you teach instead of the nuts and bolts of how many textbooks you have. I think that is an evolution that you would see in a lot of teachers and I'm just lucky enough to be in that time period.
>
> (Conversation 3, 20/9/2004)

Accountability

Sarah embeds a high level of accountability into her teaching practice and thus into her teaching identity. Our conversations made it evident that she holds a very high standard for herself and would expect an administrator to hold her accountable, also.

> I would welcome my administrator coming in and chatting with me, whether I did well or didn't do well… I would expect that if there was something that wasn't perceived as being done as well as it could be, you'd expect it to be dealt with. When I look at the results from this time, if there are some students who haven't done as well or whatever, I would expect to be reflecting on what has gone well or what hasn't gone well. I think as a professional, you should always be looking at how you can grow anyway. And your professional enhancement plan should be something quite tangible. I mean our profession has changed so much in the time that I have been in it that if you are still doing things the way you did twenty years ago, it's time to get with it.
>
> (Conversation 2, 19/8/2004)

In our final focus group meeting, Sarah indicated that she appreciates the accountability expected of teachers in Socials 30 and feels that the standardization of the assessment allows for this to happen. Sarah's quest for accountability illustrates her teaching identity as being a teacher who feels the responsibility to strive for excellence in all she does.

I also felt that accountability was important, although I preferred self-accountability. I would hold myself accountable for the results and would do what I felt was necessary to produce exemplary student scores on the diploma examination. I did feel that students, parents and administration could hold me accountable, but preferred to take the proactive approach so that they would not have to do so. It was important to be viewed as a good teacher by them.

Lived realities and attitude

A survey of Sarah's lived reality of teaching a high-stakes diploma examination course is illustrated by her attitude towards it. Our conversations revealed that she finds no fault with the design of the diploma examination itself. She views it as well-constructed and well-analyzed. I concur with Sarah's view. I always felt because the examination was developed by teachers, it accurately reflected what should be taught. A more significant issue for Sarah is the volume of material within the Social Studies 30 curriculum. Throughout our conversations, she indicated that the volume of material was significantly greater than what could be considered a natural progression of expectations from Social Studies 20 to Social Studies 30. She also questioned the 50 percent in-class weighting versus the 50 percent examination weighting due to the fact that the examination itself can only measure certain knowledge and skills. As we addressed this issue, she felt that the examination should still be an integral part of the course assessment but its weighting should be reduced to a level between 30 - 40 percent. A reduced level would still provide a significant level of expectation but allow extra room for classroom assessment where the teacher can further evaluate the skills that are not easily testable in a standardized format. Weighting of the test had not bothered me. I believed the 50/50 split in weighting was equitable, compared to the precursors of the diploma examinations, know as departmentals, which carried a 100% weight factor.

Impact of test on self and reactions to this impact

As we continued our conversations, both positive and negative effects emerged which Sarah was experiencing due to the high-stakes environment.

> I do find it very intense and I am glad when it's done, but it's not a negative thing. I think that one of the things that has come out of this for me is that I do really enjoy doing it but it is pretty hard. And that's OK. I've sort of come to that.
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

She further clarified the experience as one in which a teacher is energized in that a teacher is always looking at information with an eye to see if it can be integrated into the program, although she admits that she does see herself as harried at times, as well.

> I have often used an analogy of being a hamster on a treadmill or on the little wheel in his cage, when you are teaching this course, because you just never slow down, you never stop, you never take a breath and the kids are exactly the same way…You realize you thrive on that intensity. You know, the hamster is happy on his little wheel.
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

Our final focus group conversation also revealed some of the mental and even physiological impacts that we experience as teachers and our reactions to them. When asked how she responds when she looks at the results, Sarah expressed that just talking about it in the relaxed setting that we were in caused a literal physiological response of nervousness. She mentioned a common question asked among colleagues is "Have you heard how your students did on the exam?" In our second individual conversation, Sarah indicated that she felt this was a common stress felt by most 30-level teachers and that it comes up in collegial conversations repeatedly. I shared this same angst. Semester after semester, I would eagerly anticipate the results and to either support my own self-concept of a proficient teacher or to try and quickly correct as many areas of weaknesses that I could identify.

She also talked about the anxiety she experiences when she considers that she may not have done enough in class to prepare the students for the high-stakes test. Our final focus group happened to fall on the day of the 2004 American Presidential debate. Sarah mentioned that, if she took time out of class to discuss the debate fully, she would feel guilty because she does not feel that she has the luxury of time to dwell on points of interest that are not directly going to be asked on the examination, but she would feel equally guilty if she does not take the time to grasp such a great teachable moment.

> I generally allow my students significant control over their learning, in allowing much choice in projects and much cooperative learning. In Social 30, I feel there simply is not the same amount of time to do as much of this, and the looming exam certainly keeps me cognizant of the fact that veering off in an area of interest, if it is not directly on the curriculum,

> may mean sacrificing something important.
>
> (Sarah's reflective journal)

This goes back to the concern of wondering if she is doing as well as she could, and even psychologically "beating herself up" if she feels that she did not. Again Sarah indicated that she has this feeling often because of the pressures of trying to cover the volume of material required in Socials Studies 30.

Throughout our conversations it was evident that Sarah feels pressures and stresses teaching Socials Studies 30 that she does not experience in other courses, but they are not enough to cause her to dislike the course, to want to stop teaching it or to suggest abolition of the mandated assessment. Rather, Sarah feels that these pressures enhance her professionalism. Despite the pressures and stresses inherent in a course like this, Sarah enjoys the challenge of teaching Social Studies 30 and values the assessment as a means of accountability for herself and her students.

> I do find that I really enjoy this course because you know exactly what you have to cover and you know that you have to keep a very strict timeline and so I enjoy that aspect of it. Getting through the content, again you know you have no options so I enjoy that aspect of it. I don't think it is the exam so much. You are going to follow the curriculum in any course you teach so I think that because it has lots of material in it, you certainly have to keep to your timelines. Whether the exam was there or not, I don't know if that would make a difference. You would be following the curriculum anyway.
>
> (First Focus Group Meeting – 24/6/2004)

Sarah's and my own experience parallel each other's in the fact that, while we both experience stresses and pressures in the high-stakes environment of the diploma examinations, we do not perceive them to be negative. In fact, we both see the experience as positive. We place pressures on ourselves to ensure that we were covering everything that should be covered in the course and that could possibly appear on the examination and neither feels any significant negative external pressure. Both of us, though, certainly embed and project our own expectations of what should be done into our pedagogical selves and identities.

Impact on pedagogy

As we explored the impact that the examination in Social Studies 30 has on our pedagogy, it was evident that each of our pedagogical approaches is impacted in a variety of ways. These included our use of sources, approach to teaching methods, use of assessment, the impact of examination results on teaching practice, and learning styles. Both Sarah and I see the presence of the examination as both a positive and negative feature vis-à-vis these issues.

Use of sources

In our second conversation which dealt specifically with impact on pedagogy, Sarah shared that she finds it necessary to employ other sources to bolster the textbook and program of studies because students are most likely going to use the class notes and the textbook for information. I found it interesting that Sarah attended a diploma examination preparation course before she taught the course to gather sources, and she attended one which helped identify pedagogical approaches as well as to what themes need to be stressed. Sarah also views the evaluation rubric for the essay prepared by

Alberta Learning as one of the most effective tools to stay on course with expectations. "I love the rubric and how accurate you can feel on the rubric" (Conversation 3, 20/9/2004). I also see these sources as being very valuable in my quest for pedagogical excellence.

Methods

As our conversations probed the impact on our methods, again it was evident that we experienced these effects in similar ways. Sarah teaches another diploma examination class in addition to Socials Studies 30 and, in comparison, she feels her methodology is different in the social studies class. In her other classes, Sarah's teaching methods usually emphasize cooperative learning but she does not find as much opportunity to implement this approach as she would like in the Social Studies 30 class.

> I do find that there is probably more lecture style than I would typically do, but it is an expedient way to get through things sometimes and I also find too, that if you are letting kids go off on a bit of an inquiry process, that takes more time and you want to make sure that what they are learning, in terms of information that is accurate.
>
> (Conversation 3, 20/9/2004)

As a result, Sarah feels that she teaches more in a traditional manner than in other courses, such as transmitting information via notes and lectures more frequently, but again she views this is not so much a response to the presence of the examination but rather the volume of curricular material that may appear on the examination. She describes her teaching in Social Studies 30 as a checklist approach where she can check off everything that needs to be covered. This "recipe book" pedagogy is not what Sarah uses in her other courses or desires to use necessarily. Following this thought, I asked a question dealing with teaching to the test and if she felt that was necessary. I feel that I had certainly "taught to the test" in my experience, but she responded that she was not sure if it would be considered teaching to the test or preparing students in what to expect on the test due to the importance of familiarizing the students with the format and content of the standardized test. Our methods also parallel each other's in the fact that we both use former diploma examination questions to prepare the students. She indicated that she does not do this type of preparation in other classes that she teaches.

In-class assessment

Sarah raised the concern of in-class assessment regarding the need to teach students assessment skills to enable them to feel comfortable walking into the diploma examination. She feels, to do this, much of the classroom assessment needs to mirror the diploma examination format. As a result, the examination's style often becomes the privileged assessment style both during and at the culmination of the course. I agreed with her on this point, knowing that in my experience I created miniature simulations of the diploma examination to prepare students for the actual assessment.

Part of providing students with this familiarity of assessment methods comes in the form of more frequent quizzing and testing. If students question why this is occurring at a greater rate than in other non-diploma courses, Sarah explains that she wants to make sure they are feeling comfortable with the format of the test. Both she and I include this extra emphasis on assessment to familiarize students with the diploma examination as well as try to make them feel confident as they prepare for it. It was important for me to include as many simulations of the diploma examination type questions as possible so that students would be well prepared for them. My own tests and quizzes mirrored, in a small way, the format of the diploma examination.

Examination results impacting practice

The conversations with Sarah revealed a reflective teacher who translates tensions she feels in this high-stakes environment into positive energy to ensure she has prepared a program to enable students to do well on the examination. Any tensions that seem to bother Sarah are those that the students experience and not ones she experiences herself. When asked if she ever felt that the students' results on the examination would be used against her, she said that she has never experienced that concern. She indicated that, if the results were substandard, she would question herself, reflect on what had happened and attempt to improve them. But the concern for the students overrides any concerns she has regarding her own teaching identity or practice. Recognizing the high-stakes environment for the students and the attendant tensions they feel as they wait for the results, Sarah is concerned about the anxiety they must feel. It is evident that Sarah does not let negative tensions impact her approach other than to attempt to ensure her teaching practice is of high quality, but she does seem to feel the tensions of the students vicariously which has embodied empathy in her teaching identity as well as pedagogical approaches.

Addressing individual student needs

We both found in our experiences that individual student needs and learning styles could not be addressed in Social Studies 30 as much as in other courses. As our conversations continued, we addressed student's learning styles in Social Studies 30 and compared them to our approaches in a Social Studies 10 or 20 course. Sarah felt that she could not emphasize individual needs and styles to the same extent in the Social Studies 30 course.

> [I]t comes back to the volume question again and just knowing that 50 percent of the assessment is going to be based on a certain style of assessment. If you have a student who is particularly visually creative or someone who likes to do videos or someone who might have done a play or those kinds of things, none of that fits in.
>
> (Conversation 2, 19/8/2004)

Sarah expressed a frustration that individual student needs usually had to be taken care of outside class time instead of within the class like her other classes allow. "I find that there is not time for differentiating instruction" (Conversation 2, 19/8/2004). She sees this again as a result of the volume of material that has to be covered for the examination. Creativity by both teacher and student is lessened because of these demands. Students who excel in visual or oral presentations are not encouraged to display their talents as much as be required to answer questions in essay format which parallels the examination. The concerns of preparing students for the examinations are over-arching considerations that preclude adequately meeting individual learning styles. As I reflect on my concern for individual student needs, I believe that this concern was subsumed under the overarching concern of having the entire class perform well on the examination which had became the central goal in my class.

Curricular impact

A subsequent theme that we explored in our conversations was the impact the diploma examination had on the curriculum itself. As we explored the relationship of these two components, Sarah indicated that she felt that delivered curriculum is definitely shaped by the examination. The knowledge component and the skills that can be tested are on the test and both Sarah and I felt that these were the curricular components that were emphasized to the marginalization or exclusion of others. If certain skills and attitudes are not on the test, they do not receive adequate attention. What can be measured becomes what is focused on in the classroom. I asked her if she felt that the examination ensured that the curriculum was being taught and she responded that this was particularly true of the knowledge based parts as well as the critical thinking component, but less testable items may not appear on the examination. Sarah felt that the 50 percent teacher-assigned mark was able to cover these parts but again saw assessment methods based on the examination format creeping in and eroding a part of this element.

As our conversations continued, we discussed the skills of critical thinking, creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving and the development of citizenship skills. I asked Sarah if she felt these could be assessed through the diploma examination. She believes that they could be addressed somewhat but are limited to the writing component rather than the broad spectrum of assessment strategies available to a teacher such as visual or oral presentations. Sarah again indicated that these were able to be emphasized much more in Social Studies 10 and 20 than in 30. Her teaching assignment allows her to do this as she teaches all grades at the secondary level. She felt that, if a teacher did not have the privilege of teaching all three grades, it would be difficult to accomplish the task of developing these skills as well as to deliver the knowledge component that is required.

I agree with Sarah. It is difficult, if not impossible, to cover all the higher-order thinking skills expected by the curriculum, not only because of the volume of material that needs to be covered but also because many of these skills are not amenable to testing using a multiple-choice format. While they may be more adequately revealed through the essay, some skills are not attended to by the teacher since students may do very well on the examination without them.

I indicated I felt that the program of studies along with the textbook drove my teaching of Social Studies 30. Sarah acknowledged that, while she does not usually rely on a textbook in most of her other classes, Social Studies 30 is different. She stated that, while she uses the program of studies in each class, she refers to it more often in Social Studies 30 than in other classes that she teaches. Thus both the textbook and the curricular guidelines established by the province are critical in meeting the expectations of the examination.

> The other thing that I find myself doing more and more as I get more experience at all three levels of socials, is having them do a few more text based things than I probably would choose to do, but knowing that in grade 12, to get through the volume of material that is there, there is an expectation that they can read and understand some things from the text with minimal assistance.
>
> (Conversation 3, 20/9/2004)

Sarah also indicated that another manner in which curriculum is impacted is through the intentional coordination of skills needed on the test throughout the secondary social studies experience in all three grades. I had turned my Social Studies 10 and 20 classes into virtual "mini-diploma exam" courses, where the knowledge, skills and attitudes that could be tested were introduced at the earlier levels. In discussing this with Sarah, she agreed that the social studies department at her school coordinates these also, so that the students have an opportunity to develop the requisite skills over three years, especially in the skills needed for writing the position paper.

> [A]ctually as a department, we've made quite a concerted effort to look at writing in particular and what will be the writing expectations of the grade 10's, 11's and 12's and they are quite common. We have sort of a minimum number of pieces of writing that we'll do at each level and position papers at the younger grades as well to kind of get used to the idea of it so when they get to grade 12 it's comfortable for them. So they've done, and I can't remember the exact numbers but they've done taking a position writing a paragraph in grade 10 a few different times and then sort of expand on that in grade 11. Because too, I know what is coming in grade 12, there are some things that I'll spend more time on in 10, 11, and 12 when I do the Canadian Government. If there are a few things that come up that might be a good comparison to the US government and you know that's coming in grade 12, you can lay the framework a little bit.
>
> (Conversation 1, 10/8/2004).

Organization of Social Studies 30

A corollary question to the ones dealing with how the Social Studies 10 and 20 classes were organized vis-à-vis the 30 class is how does a teacher organize the Social Studies 30 class differently than the others? Throughout our individual and group conversations the themes of organization, pacing, curriculum and pedagogy continually emerged. It is evident from our conversations that both Sarah and I organize our Social

Studies 30 class differently than our other classes, adhering much closer to the prescribed program of studies and textbook material. The pacing of the course is also significantly different, which, as Sarah stated repeatedly, is a result of the immense volume of material rather than the diploma examination itself. It becomes a race to ensure that everything that could possibly be on the examination is covered. In reviewing the delivered curriculum, it was evident that it is necessary to parallel the program of studies and the textbooks as closely as possible. As a result, elements of the curriculum that are not testable are not emphasized. There also was an element of stressing the use of outside sources for the students to help bolster their understandings and to prepare them for the position paper component of the examination. Students are encouraged to read outside the required class materials more than in other classes. The intent of this is for them to prepare model case-studies to defend their position on the essay component.

A salient feature of the pedagogical approaches Sarah employs in Social Studies 30 is the amount of collaboration she has with other teachers. While collaboration is something she strives for in all courses, it is strongly encouraged by her department and intentionally implemented by Sarah in Social Studies 30. Along with collaboration, she is sensitive to any information that may strengthen her program and attempts to introduce supporting material as time permits. This has been a frustration for Sarah in that she would like to introduce relevant current events but can only do so in a cursory manner at times because of the demands of the course.

Sarah as reflective architect

Invoking our construction metaphor, it is evident that Sara personifies the reflective architect. She is expressly concerned with delivering an exemplary program to the students in Social Studies 30 so that they may succeed to the best of their abilities on the diploma examination. To achieve this end, she meticulously plans the course, collaborates with other teachers to ensure curricular efficiency and pedagogical efficacy and reflects on her practice throughout the semester as well as when the students' results are released. This cycle of reflective planning is of primary concern to Sarah as she develops the best possible program to deliver to the students.

Sarah expends a considerable amount of time and effort in attempting to outline the blueprint of an effective program. While it takes more time than is required in other non-diploma examination courses that she teaches, her love for social studies and for students is melded into a pedagogical approach that provides students the opportunities they need to achieve to the best of their scholastic capabilities. Sarah's story of teaching within the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30 provides a picture of the vicissitudes of teaching within this context but also illustrates how a teacher outlines and executes a comprehensive curricular and pedagogical plan.

Reflections on theory and practice

It is evident that components of the Social Studies 30 program of studies, such as the required history, geography, economics and political science elements, are adequately covered due to the presence of the diploma examination. The other components of social studies that scholars maintain are also a part of a social studies curriculum, such as citizenship (Sears, 2004), may be emphasized within the boundaries of the other curricular requirements. Other possible elements of social studies, such as multicultural education for understanding and social harmony (Friesen, 1997; Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; Kehoe, 1997), the important nexus between citizenship and global education (Pike &

Selby, 2000), peace education (Carson & Lange, 1997) and globalization (Richardson, 2004) are minimalized or absent because they are not integral components of the diploma examination. Both Sarah's and my experience indicate that the curriculum covered in class is the curriculum that may be on the diploma examination which supports the notion that what gets assessed is what gets taught (Parker, 1996; Resnick & Resnick, 1992).

Our conversations revealed that accountability is an important issue for both Sarah and me. We realize that we are accountable to ourselves in relation to how well students perform on the diploma examinations, but also are expected to perform at a certain level of public accountability due to the examination. This supports Popham's (2001) as well as Cheng and Couture's (2000) concept of increased public accountability due to the presence of a standardized examination. It is interesting to note that neither Sarah nor I react negatively to this heightened expectation, but rather viewed it as an incentive to perform to the best of our abilities.

A final observation deals Sarah's and my interest in Kohn's (1996, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004) condemnation of standardized testing. One of his contentions is that a wide exploration of ideas is precluded within a classroom that has a standardized testing component. This seems to be partially true for our classrooms. What we do in other classes as far as curricular enhancement, exploring teacher's and students' interests and addressing student needs, while not totally absent, seem to be minimalized in Social Studies 30 as the delivered curriculum focuses on examination preparation in lieu of a full exploration of ideas.

CHAPTER SIX:
BILL – THE EFFICIENT ENGINEER

Background

Bill is a veteran teacher of eighteen years and teaches English and social studies in a relatively large independent school in rural Alberta. His teaching assignment reflects the major and minor in his education degree and he has taught a variety of classes in both these disciplines. He has been teaching Social Studies 30 for fourteen years and, while teaching English is his first love, our conversations revealed that he also enjoys the content of social studies and finds that students appreciate its rigor and objectivity as compared to the discipline of English.

Bill's university experience began without a clear vision of what he wanted to do in life. He had performed well in high school and after a year of work he "bounced around a number of faculties at university" (Conversation 1, 16/7/2004) but eventually was drawn to the education faculty when he realized that the profession of teaching mirrored his own personal value system as well as interests. Bill's university experience was similar to that of my own. I also was not sure what degree to take but was drawn to a Bachelor of Education because it also reflected the personal values I held.

One of the professional activities Bill has become involved in is assisting in the development of the new secondary social studies curriculum for Alberta Learning (now Alberta Education). He has worked on the consultation draft and the validation draft of the different secondary grade levels and finds this experience invaluable for his own professional development. He feels that the curriculum is moving away from a factual approach to an issues-based approach. As he contributes to the curricular development process he is somewhat ambivalent, viewing some changes as positive and supporting the direction of the changes overall but is also finding it difficult to reconcile his own personal views with "everything that is going on in the curriculum" (Conversation 1, 16/7/2004).

I first met Bill in his school when I asked his principal for permission to speak with Bill to see if he would be willing to become a participant in my research. I believed that his involvement with curriculum development for Alberta Learning and his extensive experience in the Social Studies 30 classroom and the diploma examination would provide valuable insights. He readily accepted the invitation to join the research as a participant even though his schedule was very full, both with class load expectations as well as extra-curricular activities such as being the sponsor for the graduating class and the director of the school's year-end drama production. Even with these added responsibilities which contributed to the successful conclusion of the school year, Bill willingly participated in our first focus group which was just prior to school being officially dismissed for the summer.

The initial focus group was our first opportunity to meet as an entire group. Our conversation delved into the goals of social studies and the diploma examination's impact on curricular expectations. We discussed the approaches a social studies teacher can take in his or her own pedagogical methods ranging from transmission of knowledge to active participation. Our conversation also explored where we would place ourselves on the spectrum of content versus knowledge. This initial group conversation laid the foundation to further investigate how we experience the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination and how it ultimately impacts our pedagogy.

Bill was willing to meet on a weekly basis for our three individual conversations during the summer of 2004. The summer break, with its decreased demands, provided an opportunity to explore in-depth the issues surrounding the diploma examination in relation to our teaching selves at a more relaxed pace. We met for our first individual conversation approximately three weeks after our initial focus group meeting and completed the third one by the last week of July, 2004. I found that meeting on a regular basis like this, even though the sessions were spaced relatively close to each other, provided a continuity of thought which wove throughout our conversations and provided the ability to fully explore the issues at hand in a more comprehensive and thoughtful manner.

Experiencing the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30

Attitude towards the examination

Throughout our conversations, it became clear that Bill did not have serious issues with the diploma examination and, in fact, saw it as an integral part of the Social Studies 30 program. Bill's reflective journal reveals his general attitude about standardized assessment. "I'm not against standardiz~~ed~~ testing as long as both curriculum and testing methodology are sound." As we discussed our pedagogical selves he indicated that "I don't really have any serious problem with the assessment tool, the exam" (Second Focus Group Meeting – 13/9/2004) and "I tend to be comfortable teaching Socials 30 and 33 because of the presence of the diploma exam" (First Focus Group Meeting – 24/6/2004). He felt that it fit his teaching style in requiring students to develop a set of knowledge and skills that could be assessed through standardized methods. He also viewed the test as an effective tool for assessing the kinds of things that the curriculum requires.

Bill would agree that a good test is aligned with the curriculum so that the teachers and schools know whether students are actually learning the material that they are supposed to know (Semas, 2001). Bill's attitude towards the diploma examination resonated with my own experience, as I also saw the test as a positive component of the Social Studies 30 requirements because it reinforced my teaching style, which was largely based on transmission of knowledge. The transmission of knowledge approach seemed to be supported in both our experiences.

Bill also views preparing the students as challenging but affirming as well.

> I have to say that I have felt overall affirmed as a teacher. I remember before I had ever taught Social 30 or a 30 level course, it's not that I felt inadequate but I would say, I always wondered, 'How will it go if I get a 30 level course?' There was this sense that it was something else again and I think it is because of that big external assessment component that everybody has to contend with. So you are kind of in this large group that is facing this obstacle or challenge and as Mike says, that competitive side of you doesn't really think, 'Can I make it here in this environment? How is it going to all shape out for me?' And so I found that kind of invigorating to meet or to face that. And I still feel that I would have to say that. I still feel, 'Here we go again' and 'How are things going to go with this group, these individuals?' and 'Can I do justice to them?' and 'How will the results reflect that?' It keeps a sharpness that I have enjoyed every time I have taught the course.
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

Bill's attitude towards the examination is well-expressed in a statement that emerged from our conversations regarding whether the diploma examinations are a necessary component of the Social Studies 30 program. "Is it necessary? I would never say that any given thing is necessary. I think it is highly desired. Is it absolutely necessary? No. But is it highly desired? I'd say highly desired is my view" (Conversation 3, 28/7/2004). This opinion mirrors what my personal view was on the necessity of the examination. I felt that it was indeed an integral and desirable component of the Social Studies 30 program. However, this felicitous attitude does not preclude the expression of valid concerns dealing with the examination. Although our overall feeling towards the test was positive, our conversations noted ideas about how to improve the examination or to reduce the pressures that teachers experienced in this high-stakes environment.

Pressures and tensions

A major theme that emerged from our conversations regarding how we experience the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination dealt with how we react to both external and internal pressures. External pressures come from a variety of sources such as students, parents, administration as well as other factors such as the annual publication of results through the Fraser Institute's[1] report and ranking of schools according to school achievement on the diploma examinations. Internal pressures come from within as we try to engineer a pedagogically effective program to ensure student success on these standardized tests. In my own experience, I found these pressures to be different from those that I experience in a non-diploma examination class but as I reflected on them I believed they were neither detrimental to my teaching nor overwhelming for me. After informally chatting with several teachers from different contexts who definitely did not share this view, I was somewhat surprised in my conversations with Bill to find another teacher who experiences pressures much the same way that I did.

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[1] The Fraser Institute describes itself as an independent public policy organization. It publishes an annual ranking of schools within the province of Alberta as well as other provinces with the stated purpose to provide a tool to encourage educational improvement (Fraser Institute, 2005). One of the criterion for the ranking of each school is how the students performed on the diploma examinations.

The pressures Bill feels stem largely from a concern for his students. He worries about how he is going to best serve each student, especially considering the variety of skill levels represented by each individual pupil he teaches. While he expressed concern for all the students in his class, struggling students present the most concern in that Bill realizes the responsibility laid on his shoulders in case he wrongly counsels them to stay in the university preparatory class and attempt the diploma examination or switch to the less rigorous Social Studies 33, which also has a diploma examination, but in which the performance criteria and expectations are not as high.

> For students who are struggling to pass, I think we're all in that boat, we think, 'what do we do with this student, how are we going to serve them best?' By recommending that they move to the 33 [class] and take that or stay in 30? For those students, they fail the course and they don't graduate so if you can see that coming, and a good teacher absolutely can't miss that, you see there's some risk here. What's my responsibility in that? I better be clear in the consequences of their failure, their looming failure, their potential failure, if they are struggling.
>
> (Conversation 2, 23/7/2004)

Even after the examination is over, Bill feels pressure that he may not have covered everything in the curriculum that appeared on the test. I resonated with this feeling as I remember wondering if I had done enough to prepare students for the examination. Both Bill and I were nervous enough about how the students did and whether the test was a fair representation of the curriculum that we would question the students after the examination about it.

> I'm always kind of hanging around and asking them, "How did you feel about the question", and of course now that the test is secured, I asked, "Did they ask any of that?" Here I'm asking them, "Were there questions on this?" "What were the last five questions like?" If it wasn't a pressure creator, I wouldn't be doing that. So there's no doubt that it's [pressure] there.
>
> (Conversation 2, 23/7/2004)

Our conversations also revealed that parental pressure is a concern for Bill. He indicated that every semester parents ask about the best option for their children and what will happen when the students write the diploma examination. Both of us have had at least one unsettling discussion with a concerned parent about the expectations for the diploma examination and how we had differing viewpoints about how the student may perform, with the parent having an inflated notion of their student's ability. Bill indicated a concern that a disgruntled parent may choose to use the results in an attempt to discredit one's teaching ability although he indicated that this has never happened to him. His school has a parent-based board that operates the school and Bill sees the potential for a parent to misinterpret and abuse the results if they had a vendetta against a teacher.

Bill noted that he has not felt pressure from his administrator regarding the diploma examination results. He commented that his principal does not see the diploma examinations as the "be-all or end-all" (First Focus Group Meeting – 24/6/2004) of assessment. In fact, Bill's principal is proactive in interpreting the results for the board and other stakeholders which helps reduce misunderstanding. From conversations Bill has had with colleagues at the diploma examination essay marking sessions, he believes that his administrator's approach is not common, and that other administrators' views are very single-minded as they relate to the results by trying to ensure teachers have high scores for their classes. Bill expressed appreciation for the way his administrator views the results and for the fact that this has not been a source of negative pressure. This is where our experience differed, as my principal was much more concerned about the results and would regularly discuss how to improve diploma examination results if they were not at the level that he thought they should be at.

We discussed another source of external pressure that teachers experience. The annual publication of results by the Fraser Institute is seen by many teachers as an undue stress which school and district administrators along with parents and other stakeholders may use to make decisions about schools and teachers. When asked if the publication of results impacted him in any way, Bill stated that this was not a concern, largely due to his principal's priorities. However, he did indicate that in talking with other teachers in his work with Alberta Learning's curriculum development projects and the diploma examination essay marking sessions, some teachers have discussed with him the extreme pressure they work under to achieve acceptable marks for their class. Bill believes that the diploma examinations serve an educational purpose but unfortunately they have also served the wishes of those who want to use it for a political purpose and thus place additional pressures on teachers, although he made it clear that he would not abandon the examination due to this misuse.

> I believe in the exam and I think it serves an educational purpose and unfortunately, all of that, at times, is abused by the powers that be, and becomes a political tool in spite of its good intentions and in spite of the good things that are being accomplished due to its presence. I think that it is unfortunate because there is a number attached to it, because it had this, you can quantify that. There are all kinds of politically motivated elements that would say, "OK, these numbers, now we can use it as a number." We know what that means so now they run away with it and that's unfortunate and yet I wouldn't want to see it abandoned because it is occasionally abused.
>
> (Conversation 2, 23/7/2004)

Our conversations also revealed that personal internal pressure is more intense than any external pressures that either of us experience. We both place on ourselves certain expectations which include attempting to have our classes do better on the examinations so as to ameliorate any potential external pressures. These self-imposed pressures have reduced in intensity over time but are still noticeable. Bill noted that the examination environment is intense and "every year I feel a certain amount of pressure" although he admits it is not as noticeable as the first year he taught the course when even his students noticed his stress levels and said to him, "I think you are more nervous than we are" (Conversation 2, 23/7/2004). The results themselves also create internal tension for Bill as he agonizes over whether he served the students to the best of his ability and whether they will do well on the examination or not.

> Whenever I see a grade discrepancy where their grade has gone up considerably or surprisingly or going the other way, I get in that knot. Because if they do better on the exam then you feel, 'Didn't I see something?' You have to rationalize every grade you gave them and think the whole thing over. Or the other way, you think 'Was I excessively optimistic about them as students, because I had one girl who dropped a lot. I thought 'Wow. What did I do there?'
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

Bill's Pedagogical Self – The value of service

In our first individual conversation, Bill indicated that he became interested in teaching because it had intrinsic value other than material gain as a measure of success. This became evident throughout our conversations as Bill's teaching identity emerged, encapsulated in his statement,

> I think I have ended up doing things that I very much enjoy and it's very rewarding but mostly I think, it is being able to serve others and to use things I'm good at, to use my own talents in a way that benefits my students.
>
> (Conversation 1, 16/7/2004)

Bill believes that this inherent value of service to others is not unique in his experience but is seen in the lives of many teachers, some whom he has had the privilege of being colleagues with in different settings. He spoke of many teachers, like himself, who receive incommensurable and intangible rewards through the interaction with students and the opportunity for cultivation of values in their young minds.

> Nobody is really drawn into teaching for the money and so I see, in my colleagues and other teachers I have an opportunity to work with in other settings, the same kind of motivation I think that they are looking for and the kinds of rewards that interacting with students give and I guess they are not easily measurable. They're not dollars and piling up possessions kinds of things. They're kind of intangible but I guess it's tied to the sense that you are cultivating in younger people the kinds of things you value yourself and you're trying to build in a little of your own outlook or perspective or way of thinking in them that you feel that would be good to share, not in a selfish way. You don't want to turn out little versions of yourself necessarily but you're using part of yourself you think others could be rewarded by exposure to.
>
> (Conversation 1, 16/7/2004)

The expression of these values in the classroom is reflected in the lives of many of Bill's students. Many continue to correspond with him even after graduation and it is satisfying to him to realize that a significant number choose occupations with similar altruistic value systems rather than those in which monetary gain is the ultimate end. He sees this as something of lasting value that has come out of their shared classroom experience. This feeling parallels my own experience since the reason I chose the teaching profession is that it provides the opportunity to share the values that I deem important while realizing that the rewards are intrinsically realized rather than having a materialistic orientation. The service component of teaching and enabling others to achieve their goals and be the best that they can be is what attracted me to teaching, also. I am pleased that my teaching career has been a commingling of my interest in serving others along with teaching in a subject area that is of personal interest, also. Our conversations revealed that we both experienced this in similar ways.

Self reflection through narrative

"A very clear connection between the teacher and the curriculum must be maintained; a personal passion for the subject is essential" (Bill's reflective journal). This statement indicates that just teaching the curriculum is not enough for Bill. His pedagogical approach through narrative supports Kerby's (1991) notion of narrative and self as being one and Bill engages it through a personal passion as it becomes a living experience for both him and his class. The passion he has for social studies became evident throughout the conversations. Bill's teaching identity emerged as he described his pedagogical techniques and how he vicariously immerses himself and his class into the topic at hand through the use of personal narrative to help bring history alive. In our first individual conversation, Bill shared with me some of the teaching devices that he uses to support the curriculum. He brought with him original photographs of his grandfather's resistance group taken at the end of the Second World War.

Bill related that, during the war, his grandfather who lived in a country that was occupied by the Germans had been arrested and detained in a Nazi jail for the crime of listening to a radio which had been banned. When he was released from prison, Bill's grandfather joined a resistance group and became active in trying to overthrow the occupying force and to try and bring liberty back to his country. Bill indicated that he relies on stories like this to not only bring history alive to the students but to also bring home to the students that at times we are required to make life-changing decisions for the betterment of others.

> My dad has told me a lot of stuff he knew and that really has brought that time of history alive for me with a personal connection and I have shared with student these documents and that's when they just sit there quiet. I say, "Now history isn't this dead thing." For you it may seem a long time ago but my grandpa, who has since passed away, is a real person to me and I've learned about his personal experiences and he lived in the midst of these events that we talk about from this huge perspective. I think what I've been able to do through the story of my grandpa and using these documents is to show them that history is still about real living people, whether they are with us still or not. They had interesting lives that were very much moulded by the events around them.
>
> (Conversation 1, 16/7/2004)

Through narrative Bill draws his connection to and passion for history and tries to impact the students with the knowledge that there are larger forces, events, and people which directly impact their lives. This not only opens the students' eyes to major issues but also shows how real and interesting social studies can be. This personal connection and the use of narrative intrigued me as we discussed this approach. I had not used a significant amount of narrative in my teaching. I was of the opinion that I needed to cover what was in the textbook and program of studies in the most efficient manner and not attempt creative methods to do so. Bill opened my eyes to the possibility of covering the curricular material in a unique and effective way and which does not jeopardize students' results on the diploma examination but which provides both an efficient and creative pedagogy.

Impact on pedagogy

Recognition of impact

Out of our conversations emerged understandings that the presence of the diploma examination did indeed change our pedagogical methods, that our approaches in Social Studies 30 were different due to the presence of the external examination and that it impacted our teaching methods in both a positive and negative manner. Bill felt that there was an all-pervasive feeling of enhanced importance due to the examination.

> The presence of the diploma exam is a significant factor at all times, in my approach to teaching the course. In the content, I feel that I must cover, in the time I was given and in my testing and assessment practices, it's either at the back of my mind or the front of my mind, in most of what I do.
>
> (Conversation 2, 23/7/2004)

As we explored how our teaching practices are influenced by the examination, Bill felt that the overall effect was generally positive and that something takes place in this class due to the examination that is not present in those that do not have it. He attributed this to the increased rigour required of both the teacher and students. The metaphor of "the big game", with something important on the line, threaded through our conversations. Bill felt that when this is the situation, it tends to bring out the best performance of both teacher and student. He believes that it does make a difference in how each player in the game reacts. The extra care and attention to both pedagogical and curricular detail produces positive results. I concurred with Bill as we discussed impact on pedagogy. While there is a narrowing of pedagogical approaches in the classroom, the presence of the diploma examination does not reduce a teacher's methods to such a bare minimum that it is an untenable course to teach. I noticed that the pressure of the examination provided an incentive to most students to give their best effort.

Impact of Results

Another way Bill feels the impact of the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination is through the students' results. He uses them to assess his teaching as he reviews them thoroughly to see if they indicate areas on the examination that he required too much of the students or areas that need to be bolstered. I found it interesting that the day we were discussing this concept Bill indicated that he was going to the school after our conversation to do this review with the recently received results. This would not necessarily be unusual except that it was during summer break. I know that I would do this also, because reviewing the results and subsequently my pedagogical approaches immediately upon receipt was more important to me than ensuring an uninterrupted vacation. This was evident in Bill's experience also.

Ambivalence and excitement

Bill's responses to the impact of the examination, while positive in general, did reveal a measure of ambivalence towards its presence. With the drive to ensure students are prepared to write the diploma examination Bill feels that there is also the chance that it will become the overriding concern of the class.

> I'm very sensitive to leaving the students at a point, where they are ready to write that test. Is that even a paramount thing? Without a doubt. And that perhaps shows a little bit of the weakness of it, that it is paramount.

> The test preparation, maybe that's where we get a little too carried away.
>
> (Conversation 3, 28/7/2004)

This ambivalence turned to excitement as we discussed Bill's experience in developing the new Alberta secondary social studies curriculum and the direction it is taking in relation to assessment and the ultimate impact it will have on teaching style. He feels that the new curriculum will emphasize skills rather than content and the assessment component then could be similar to the model of the current English Language Arts 30 diploma examination where skills are emphasized over content. Bill feels that this approach to both curriculum and evaluation will allow for more pedagogical freedom and the ability to follow the students' interests more. Along with this, both he and I believe that there can be a move away from a transmission of culture and knowledge approach to a more balanced program with elements of active participation throughout the Social Studies 30 course. A standardized assessment could still be present but it would reflect a wider range of skills more closely aligned with those expected in social studies and its ultimate goal of responsible citizenship.

> We were sure that if students had even an adequate knowledge base, the main thing would be that they would be able to approach the question and read the sources and interpret, analyze, evaluate, and there would definitely be reduced pressure in terms of the teacher having to cover certain content. And I think that already speaks to a greater freedom in the classroom, to say 'let's just look at a few of these, let's read this, let's watch this and let's respond to it by using a variety of strategies and I think that will give a potential for doing the kinds of things that are

> inherently perhaps more interesting and tap into students desire to go into a certain directions.
>
> (Conversation 2, 23/7/2004)

Curricular impact

Evaluation of the prescribed KSAs

In relation to the impact that the diploma examination has on curriculum, our conversations revealed that Bill has both positive and negative reactions. In a positive vein, Bill feels the expectations of the assessment require a solid foundation of knowledge which is required for responsible citizenship, the ultimate goal of social studies in Alberta. He sees the skills required for making wise decisions and the ability to attack and approach ideas as being based on a foundation of knowledge and that the Social Studies 30 course provides this foundation, in part, due to the presence of the examination. While laying the foundation of knowledge is important to Bill, he sees the examination as a much broader assessment. He believes that the examination not only tests for knowledge but also for a variety of skills that students need for further academic endeavours as well as those that will serve them students well throughout their life such as critical thinking.

> The net effect for me I think over the years of doing it is pretty strongly positive and the reason for that I think is when I look at the test and the things it tests for, I have no great issue with that. I think these are the things, so many of the things we have encountered on the test are the things you want kids to know, the knowledge, and they are tested for the kinds of skills that you think a well prepared 18 year old should have and

> so, to that end I can't really say that there is some kind of big educational compromise when students are exposed to that kind of environment where there is a diploma exam.
>
> (Conversation 3, 28/7/2004)

As our conversations further probed the prescribed curriculum of Social Studies 30, Bill indicated that he approaches the curriculum slightly differently than in other courses and that curricular details are concentrated on to a larger degree than may be the case in those courses that do not have the examination requirement. Bill expressed that the knowledge and skills required in the curriculum are definitely focused on and taught well, but he also feels that the attitudes required to be covered may get short shrift in the standardized testing environment since they are not easily testable.

> I am, without a doubt, more aware of teaching content, making sure that all of the pertinent content is covered or as much as it is within my power to do that, and not much behind that is making sure the skills that are going to be tested are covered and I think in terms of the attitude, those are probably less clearly done because of the fact that I'm not convinced the exam tests for those very obviously or clearly.
>
> (Conversation 3, 28/7/2004)

Standardization of curriculum and assessment

In reviewing curriculum from a more generalized perspective, Bill supports a standardized curriculum with a standardized assessment component. He believes that the educational system should have internal unity which provides for common understandings to emerge. Although different teachers will have a variety of philosophies, standardization attempts to develop common understandings as well as provide a more equitable experience for students from various locations and backgrounds. Bill sees that a standardized curriculum and assessment program calls students from across the province to certain common understandings and allows them to relate to the common issues that society in general is facing. It also prevents renegade interpretations by teachers who may want to develop personal approaches to the delivery of curriculum. Education is a collective endeavour and Bill questions how it can be successful if there is no singleness of purpose.

> It doesn't mean that you have the same philosophical foundation to life but it does mean that we are all living in the society together and trying to achieve some things together. We achieve the same things and then also you do get a sense that you're comfortable with something beyond yourself. This idea that I am only accountable to my only personal profession standards, I don't buy that at all. I think that's just living in an absolute dream world, it's even irresponsible.
>
> (Conversation 2, 23/7/2004)

As I personally have reflected on our conversations regarding standardization, I know that, during the majority of my teaching years, my view paralleled Bill's. I believed that standardization was important to provide a common foundation of understanding for students, even though they may have differing opinions on the various issues that arise in social studies. A standardized assessment tool, such as the diploma examination, can assess whether this curriculum is being learned. More recently I have realized there may be dangers with a standardized curriculum, recognizing that the dominant received view provided by the developers of the curriculum may not fully represent or recognize the multiple perspectives of either the students or the teachers in the classrooms. Because the curriculum itself is not a mirror of these perspectives, the assessment tool cannot reflect anything but the required curriculum. Thus, standardization may have the effect of solidifying a dominant set of viewpoints to the marginalization or exclusion of others.

Curricular problematics

The problems Bill perceived with the diploma examination vis-à-vis the curriculum were varied, but in his view were not enough to disqualify the standardized assessment from being an integral component of the Social Studies 30 program. One major issue was with the weighting of the examination. The examination is worth 50% of a student's final grade, and Bill pointed out that he believes this is too heavily weighted compared to the usual test weight of university classes for which many of the students in Social Studies 30 are preparing. Along with this, the potential to create in-class assessment as a mirror image of the diploma examination creates a situation where more than 50% of the overall mark is ascribed to the preparation as well as the examination itself. I also saw this concern as significant because I intentionally created specular reproductions of the examination for all my major in-class assessments. While it was justifiable to do so in an attempt to create a familiarity with the examination structure, it also led to an increased emphasis of weighting in the final grade.

Bill also decries the recent "bureaucratic" decision to schedule the two parts of the diploma examination on different days, sometimes being as much as two weeks apart. The curricular impact is great in that the large amount of material that was difficult to cover in the allotted amount of time is now that much more difficult to accomplish since the curriculum needs to be covered for both parts of the examination. Valuable in-class time is lost due to this arbitrary scheduling decision by Alberta Learning. Along with these problems, Bill also cites the loss of opportunity to explore student interests or needs due to the increased pace that is required to cover all the material for the examination.

Organization of Social Studies 30

As our conversations evolved over time, it became clear that both Bill and I organized our Social Studies 30 class differently than classes that we taught which did not have a diploma examination. The courses in Social Studies 10 and 20 do not require a preoccupation of being on schedule, covering material, constant adjustment of delivery and the same devotion of attention in that the teacher has more choices due to the fact that they are not assessment driven. Bill shared that the chronological organization, and the sequencing and the allotment of time for Social Studies 30 is based on what he is required to complete so that the students are ready for the examination. The strict adherence to a schedule is important to Bill and an accompanying increase in stress is accompanied if there is a divergence from this schedule. "I stick to a chronology, right or wrong, much more religiously" (Conversation 3, 28/7/2004). Bill finds that the diploma examination changes the organizational scheme in relation to prioritizing content and schedule. I certainly concurred with Bill that the demands to organize the class schedule more intentionally and adhere to it are much greater in Social Studies 30.

Bill as effective engineer

As an engineer is required to thoroughly know the expectations, laws, industry standards and regulations to ensure a strong building project, so the teacher in the high-stakes environment must do the same with accurate knowledge and competent proficiency. Bill exemplifies the efficient engineer as he reviews and then executes the curricular requirements which allow for the best possible student outcomes. He reviews the curriculum thoroughly, designs pedagogical approaches which support the curricular expectations and then guides the teaching process in a finely-tuned manner to enable success on the diploma examination. Just as an engineer designs a building with attention to detail and exactness to regulations, Bill accepts this challenge and creates his program in Social Studies 30 with the same thoroughness and care. While accomplishing this in a pressure-filled environment, he is able to turn the attendant stresses into positive forces which help him create an effective, efficient and efficacious program within the confines of the high-stakes environment

Reflections on theory and practice

Bill's attitude towards the diploma examination reveals a positive stance and evidence that he views it as an opportunity to further hone pedagogical skills. Luijten's (1991) notion that standardized examinations require teachers to make their lessons more accurate and concise rings true with Bill. He views this as a positive component of the diploma examination program. It provides an opportunity to ensure that his pedagogical approaches are effective and can be verified by the results. Bill would agree with Parker's (1996) belief that large-scale externally mandated assessment helps focus student and teacher attention on what should be learned and thus enhances learning.

The pressures inherent in a standardized program do not seem to adversely affect Bill. External pressure is not something he is worried about partly because his current principal deflects the possibility of this pressure by actively educating parents and the school board members what the results mean. Bill's experience belies Popham's (2001) assertion that pressures brought on by standardized examinations result in a confining and restrictive influence on the methods that teachers employ in their classes. He does not consider them confining but rather a setting of boundaries by which both teacher and student may achieve success. The pressures that Bill keenly feels are the internal ones that he places on himself. Again, these are interpreted as motivating factors rather than negative elements.

It is evident that Bill has adopted successful teaching methods that support the curriculum and prepare students for the diploma examination. His emphasis on history through narrative provides a creative environment for students to learn the material required for the examination but in a more interesting way than the traditional method of lecturing and allows provides opportunity to reveal his teaching identity. He believes that the possibilities of the new curriculum and its thematic approach may allow more of these types of pedagogical approaches to be introduced into classrooms.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
SCOTT – THE CONFIDENT JOURNEYMAN

Background

Scott teaches in a small independent school located in rural Alberta and is the only social studies teacher who teaches the 10-20-30 stream in the school. As such, he has virtually the same students for the all three years of their senior secondary experience. He has been at this same school for the last six of his ten teaching years. Previous to this position, Scott taught junior high school in another province. This experience helped Scott realize that teaching at the secondary level was much more his métier and he feels that his current position allows him to do his best pedagogical work because of the older, more mature students.

For Scott, the decision to move into the teaching profession was made late in his university experience. He relates that "I had never planned on being a teacher" (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004) but was in his final year of university and was having to make a choice. History and government courses made up a significant portion of the classes he had taken but he believed that a history degree may be limiting. Scott had an interest in continuing on and working towards a degree in law but felt that a switch to education would provide a backup. With this in mind, Scott finished a degree in education but saw it as more as a temporary measure, still seeing law as a more long-term career. He spent his first year of teaching in the role of substitute teacher and then received a full-time position for his second year. He started in his present position six years ago and after a decade of teaching, though he never planned to stay this long in the profession, he reflects that it "feels natural and not something that I hate to do everyday" (Scott's reflective journal). He is not sure he will continue to teach forever but finds it easy.

As I compare Scott's experience with my own, similarities jump out. I never confirmed my decision to teach until late in my undergraduate experience also wanting to pursue a law degree based on my interest in history. As with Scott, I also find that I am able to connect with the older the students to a better degree as well. It is interesting that these commonalities, while not intentionally, brought us both to the secondary social studies classroom and a professional and personal experience that we mutually enjoy. Through this career choice, we both experience fulfillment of our personal interests as well as enjoy the opportunity to share this personal interest with students.

When I approached Scott to become a part of the research, he willingly accepted. His interest in and commitment to the research project was clearly illustrated on the day of our first focus group meeting, which happened to be on the same day he was preparing the senior class for graduation. Even with this extra year-end responsibility, Scott voluntarily gave up time to begin the process of engaging in conversation. Our individual conversations began in the early summer and were spread out over the next several months, into the next school year with a gap of approximately two weeks to one month between each session. The last two individual conversations occurred right before school started in the fall and then several weeks into September. The extended time between conversations allowed us to more fully reflect on the themes that emerged and to engage in our next conversations with a thorough contemplative approach although at times the gap between each one did require a review of our earlier ones. We met in Scott's school office to engage in our conversations which provided for opportunities to readily speak about his pedagogical approaches through the use of artefacts.

Experiencing the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30

Accountability

A dominant theme that emerged from our conversations was accountability. Scott feels that it is important to have accountability at all levels and believes that systems, teachers and students need to be accountable for their respective roles in the educational process. He indicated support for the diploma examination program and feels it provides accountability for the provincial system of education which he sees as one of the premier educational systems in Canada and North America if not the world. The standardized assessment component of the Social Studies 30 course is seen as necessary by Scott for the province of Alberta to ensure that high standards are maintained. While he understands that the examination will never be perfect or please everyone, Scott supports the current provincial diploma examination program in its present form.

Accountability is also required of the teachers to protect against incompetent teaching. Scott expects much from himself as well as his provincial colleagues.

> One of the things that I like about the standardized testing is the fact that, in my mind, it keeps there from being a slack teacher somewhere that slides by and gets away with doing nothing. Even a teacher that maybe isn't as well-rounded a teacher or does struggle more or does have a tough time with the curriculum, there still is that minimum that they have to get to be successful for teaching a 30-level course. I like that. I hate to think that somewhere there is somebody that is not doing their share and short-changing the kids. I think that is partly why the province has standardized testing. It does require that there is a certain level of acceptability teaching

> wise across the province.
>
> (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004)

As we further discussed the possibilities of teachers not being accountable, Scott indicated that he puts in significant hours to ensure a quality program in his classroom and indicated that he would expect no less from anybody else. He also believes that the standardized testing format keeps everyone on the same page and forces accountability and competence of all teachers, including himself.

> I think for those teachers that are weak, it either forces them to teach to a style that is going to lend them success or maybe in some cases, even removes them from that position. I like that idea, but there are restrictions to it. I definitely would teach the course a little bit differently than what I do if I didn't have that exam.
>
> (Conversation 2, 27/8/2004)

Scott also feels the diploma examinations provide motivation for students to perform to the best of their abilities. In our third conversation, the metaphor of a coach emerged in our conversations which supported the concept of accountability. The notion that the teacher motivates not only through encouragement but also through attitude was inherent throughout our conversation. The expectation of the students to do well and be accountable for their success with the positive support of the teacher parallels the experience that Scott has in his extra-curricular coaching of school teams.

> I think that in a lot of ways that you are a coach and you are there to trying to make it as enjoyable as possible and I think that there is something to be said about a teacher's attitude in the class and towards the test on how

> those students are going to do. I'm never negative about the test. I [tell them] 'This is the way it is. This is what you've got to do to succeed. If you do this, you will do well.'
>
> (Conversation 3, 10/9/2004)

Scott further posits that, because we do not live in an ideal world where all teachers would do more than what is required of them and every student would be fully prepared for future educational challenges, it is important to require a standardized assessment tool to ensure at least a minimum level at which each teacher and each student is required to perform. He indicated that he sees equality being achieved in the social studies program through the diploma examination program because it requires the same of everybody. It provides a level bar for both student and teacher and holds them accountable.

Scott's teaching identity

Scott's background, interests and teaching style emerged throughout the conversations and, as we discussed the aspects of one's pedagogical identity, it became apparent that our teaching styles are similarly based on comparable personal histories, educational training and experience and these are what have been drawn together to produce quite similar approaches to teaching in general and to the discipline of social studies in particular. Scott's description of how social studies was important even as a child resonated clearly with me.

> I always liked social studies and politics and government. I can remember, even as a little kid watching the news, which is odd. When I look at it now, it seems there was something wrong with me. I started reading really

> early and I would read stuff that I don't think that a normal kid would read about government and politics and history and that stuff has always been interesting. That's why when I got into college, I didn't know what I wanted to do but I liked history so I took those classes. It has always been an interest and that's how I fell into it, I guess.
>
> (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004)

While Scott has always had a strong interest in history, the history components of the Alberta secondary social studies program parallel those areas of history which appeal to him the most. While Canadian and modern European history are where his passions lie, he has also developed a keen interest in earlier European history after being required to teach this era by the Alberta secondary program of studies. The other components of social studies such as geography, political science and economics are also personal interests of Scott's. Economics holds a particular appeal since one of his earlier tracks in university had been a business program.

With most of these interests stemming from childhood it seems natural that, while Scott was not sure of a career path until late in his post-secondary experience, they have formed the basis of his choice in becoming a social studies teacher. The personal interest Scott has in the various fields in social studies also keeps him current in the field. He indicated that he continually reads material paralleling and relevant to the curriculum and follows news stories naturally, not necessarily because they may contribute to classroom presentation but because of the interest and personal enjoyment this material brings him. He sees the connection between personal interest and his professional field a serendipitous reality. Scott's and my interests parallel each other very closely. I also have a personal interest in history which has been translated into a professional career. The other components of social studies have also been of interest to me even though not as much as history. Both Scott and I believe we are fortunate to have found a career that ties our personal interests to that of our profession.

Scott self-description of his teaching style is that of a hard, difficult teacher with high expectations of his students. He indicated that the students usually know his reputation even before they come to his class and so, when they enter a course that he is teaching, they already know that their learning experience will be mediated by a teacher with high expectations but who will provide the information they need to know to be successful. As our conversations revolved around this motif, Scott indicated that he believes that this pedagogical persona is not affected by the presence of the diploma examination. He feels that his teaching identity would not change even without the demands of the high-stakes test since his approach is similar in the non-diploma examination classes that he teaches as well as in his earlier teaching career in junior high. "I think it is just more who I am and don't think the exam has really affected that" (Conversation 2, 27/8/2004). He does see the complementary nature of both the examination requirements and his teaching style and indicated that they do merge together quite well. The fact that there is a significant amount of material to cover in Social Studies 30 to prepare the students for the diploma examination which requires discipline as a teacher indicates that his teaching style and the expectations of the examination do not clash.

Scott indicated that he relies largely on the pedagogical approach of lecturing to provide the students the information they need for the diploma examination and again feels that the volume of curriculum and the expectations of the examination lend themselves to this teaching method.

> There is this amount of information that has to be covered in this time and there still is, I guess, the perceived option of being creative with that time, but because of the volume, I think that reality does limit that. It's fortunate that for me, my teaching style doesn't seem to conflict with that volume of work, but I would suspect that for somebody who is a very creative teacher, who does a lot of different things and wants to do a lot of different things and has never taught that lecture style or doesn't like that lecture style because they couldn't learn from it, I think that could be real tough.
>
> (Conversation 2, 27/8/2004)

In our individual conversations, Scott indicated that he sees himself as a bit of an anomaly in that he not only enjoys teaching the Social Studies 30 but also has a positive attitude towards the diploma examination.

> I think that overall I am more positive about this exam than your average social studies teacher. I hear a lot of whining and complaining about it. I don't see it. And maybe it's because I've taught in another province that didn't have this high education standard. I went to school in Alberta. I wrote the test. I wasn't against them… I thought it helped and prepared you for university and the demands of that higher level of thinking because of those big tests…I've always had in my mind that Alberta is on the right track and I don't mind the test.
>
> (Conversation 3, 10/9/2004)

I found this intriguing because this is certainly the way I felt towards the examination. Towards the end of our focus group conversations it became evident that all the participants were not as negative toward the examination as either Scott or I imagined others to be. As we discussed these ideas with the others, I believe our own self-image was somewhat rehabilitated from that of an outsider to one that belongs to a group of colleagues who views the high-stakes of the diploma examination in a reasonably similar manner which connotes positive acceptance albeit with some concerns, though none enough to reject it.

Confidence

It was evident from our conversations that Scott exhibited a comfortable confidence in relation to the diploma examination. With his continuing experience of teaching Social Studies 30, Scott has become more secure in this role to the place where he feels very little internal pressure compared to when he first began teaching the course. Having class averages consistently above provincial average allows this confidence and supports Scott's pedagogical approaches.

> I think it has changed for me from when I first taught it. The first couple of times I think you were pretty nervous. You thought you were doing a good thing and you expected the students to do well but you weren't sure and you didn't know what to expect. The more I taught it, the more I realized that the majority of them will be pretty close to what they've done in class. There will be that occasional one that does a lot better and that one that does very poor for whatever reason. For me, it's got to the point where eventually the grades end up in my office and I look at them. I don't

> go hunt them down. I guess I'm pretty relaxed and casual when it comes to the grade aspect because I think that I am pretty confident that they are going to do well. I've prepared them. I've taught the course enough that there are really not all that many surprises other than the typical odd question that you have no idea where it came from. I don't beat myself too much over those because there is nothing really that you can do. I think that I am pretty laid back now when it comes to what those marks are.
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

External pressures are slightly different for Scott in that he does recognize them. While they are not overwhelming, he experiences pressure from his administration and from students and parents at times. Even with these pressures, he maintains his confidence in his teaching efficacy and the exemplary student results help prevent these pressures from affecting what he does in the classroom to the point that "I'm real confident in what I do and what I know and so I just do my own thing" (Conversation 2, 27/8/2004).

Pressure from administration to achieve and maintain excellent results has been consistent but Scott notes that he does not feel nor respond to it as much as he did when he first began. While most pressure coming from administration is general in nature, Scott related an interesting story in which pressure from both administration and parent merged into a moment of tension which few teachers' experience. One of his students was the child of his principal and during that particular semester the principal came to Scott and informed him that his child's marks were not indicative of the student's true ability and "suggested" that Scott revise the marks upward. Scott's refusal to adjust the marks that he believed were appropriate was confirmed when the diploma examination results were released and both in-class and examination results were quite similar. This affirmation in the face of unique external pressures was a boost to Scott's confidence in his pedagogical effectiveness.

Impact on pedagogy

Teaching strategies

As our conversations began to revolve around the pedagogical strategies a teacher uses to ensure the students have the required information for the diploma examination, Scott indicated that the teaching methods he uses, not only in Social Studies 30 but also in 10 and 20, revolve around preparing the students for the diploma examination. This strategy has been successful for Scott and his students and has been confirmed by the results of the examination.

> My whole way of teaching seems to be geared to that one exam and I guess that is a bad thing but how else can you make sure your students will be successful. I am sure there are other ways but this way has been so effective for me that I do not want to change. From grades 10-12, I prepare all my students for what that one test will be like in grade 12. In some ways I guess it handicaps what I do but in other ways I am given a goal and gear what I do towards it. Is there a better way for the province to test what they do? I am sure there is but as a teacher I am committed to have my students succeed and so I am somewhat tied to "the system".
>
> (Scott's Reflective Journal)

As we continued our conversations about teaching methods, Scott indicated that lecturing was the primary teaching method that he uses and he feels that it is the best way to get through the curricular material that is required for the students to know.

> I think that, as teachers, we do what is comfortable to us and for me, that more traditional way of teaching worked for me. I liked it. I could sit and listen to somebody lecture for hours. It doesn't bother me…I guess I was influenced, because it worked for me and I enjoyed it and if you go back 10, 15, or 20 years, that was the predominant way that teaching was done, particularly teaching in history and social studies. I think that it's just familiarity and for me it worked so I use it.
>
> (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004)

Our further conversations revealed that while Scott relies largely on the lecture method to convey the requisite curricular material that will be covered on the diploma examination, his approach in this high-stakes class differs somewhat from his other classes. Pointing out that, while his style of teaching more naturally lends itself to the lecture mode of delivery, in the Socials Studies 10 and 20 classes that he teaches, he ensures that he takes a more creative approach. But in the 30 class,

> because of the need to get through the information, you can't take a class and do something like an "arty" type project in it. Or you maybe can't take three days and do a mock parliament. I mean, you don't have that cushion there. So, definitely, when it comes to the 30 class it's much more on the structured, mechanical end than in 10 and 20 where you don't have that. There is a lot more creativity and flexibility in what I do [in 10 and 20].
>
> (Conversation 2, 27/8/2004)

Lecture had also become the prominent pedagogical method for me, also. I relied on it to convey the curricular information efficiently as Scott indicated. As I reflected on this, I realized that I used the lecture method more in Social Studies 30 than my other social studies classes, largely to cover the voluminous material in a minimum amount of time but also because, like Scott, I found it the method that I preferred as a learner as well as a teacher. I do not view myself overly creative, but in my other classes I forced myself to be more creative for the students' interest sake. In Social Studies 30 I did not feel this same compulsion, because lecturing lent itself more to an economical use of time and coverage of the curricular material that may appear on the diploma examination.

Integration of artefacts

While it became evident that Scott relied on lecture to transmit the knowledge required for the diploma examinations, it also was obvious that he went to great effort to provide the students with historical objects such as artefacts and pictures to cover "that much information and still keep everyone awake" (Conversation 3, 10/9/2004). As I had asked each participant to bring an artefact to our initial individual conversation in an attempt to illustrate their pedagogical approaches to Social Studies 30, Scott provided a description of an extensive array of objects that he uses throughout his courses to help students remember the information that they receive in class. He showed a clip from a gun that was used during the Second World War to illustrate his approach of bringing to class "something that is a little bit odd or a little bit different" (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004) to provide a mental hook for the voluminous amount of information the students are required to learn in the Social Studies 30 class.

> I have a lot of different pieces like this that I bring in, [from] badges, to helmets, to shovels, to actual guns from World War II and World War I and I try and bring that information in and tie it in to stuff that we are studying at that time. I found that sort of stuff they will remember… They'll remember that stuff and if I can tie it to something that we will really be testing them on, hopefully they are going to remember the whole package. That's just a little bit of what I try and do to bring some oddball stories and tell them some crazy things that happened that aren't really a publicized fact and are kind of behind the scenes that tie the story in or tie the artefact in to what was kind of going on when they were making that history that we are trying learn… I have some maps. I bought the flags. I have some native carvings in there. I try to have a variety of stuff that not only interests from a visual but also something that they can touch and handle and I just try to bring something like that in every week or so just to mix it up a little bit.
>
> (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004)

Scott indicated that he spends much time at antique sales and auctions to provide these examples in an attempt to make the facts of history come alive for his students. While relying on a traditional format of delivery through the method of lecturing, he intentionally makes classroom presentations interesting as well as provides devices to enhance student recall.

Time and pace

Time and pace become much more of a concern in Social Studies 30 for Scott than in other courses. The requirement to move through the course and cover the entire curriculum keeps him on a strict timeline and a more rigid pace.

> In [Social Studies] 30, I don't want to give a day away to anybody for anything, because I've got to make it up then and there's times when that's happened whether it be weather or something that was planned in the calendar and you lose that day and you think, 'OK, now I've got to come up with 40 pages today. I've got to cover two chapters because there is no other time to do it.
>
> (Conversation 2, 27/8/2004)

I also felt this pressure of pace in my experience. I believed that I could not lose any time at all or the students would not be transmitted all the knowledge and skills that they needed to be successful on the examination. The need to cover the entire curriculum and to provide students the necessary foundation of knowledge resulted in a careful guarding of all available time and a steady, if not hectic, pace.

Curricular impact

Standardized curriculum

Our conversations delved into standardized curriculum and assessment and yielded interesting insights. While Scott believes it is important for a province to require standardized curricular expectations, he did not believe this same requirement would be an effective model for larger or multiple jurisdictions. At our first focus group, Scott indicated that he liked the idea of a provincial-wide standardized curriculum taught in all the schools across the province. He felt that, wherever a teacher may be, he or she is being kept to a similar standard and thus producing similar results. This theme was interwoven with that of the concept of accountability throughout our other conversations as well.

> It keeps you an honest teacher, because especially for the grade 12 with an exam that tests on what you taught, it does require that you do cover a set of material. You have to get through that information…I like the idea that there is a standard across the province that has to be taught and that there is information that has to be covered by every grade 12 student, regardless of the school or the city or location.
>
> (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004)

Scott further discussed what he deemed as benefits of a provincially standardized curriculum.

> Provincially, it means that every grade 12 student is doing the same course, the same work. I think that is good. It does give the appearance at least of a level playing field and does seem to indicate that a kid from one end of the province to one at the other end should have access to and knowledge of the same information when all is said and done. I do think that we do need to have some standards in place like that.
>
> (Conversation 3, 10/9/2004)

Along with the notion of a standardized curriculum providing a level playing field, another advantage we discussed is that of the necessity of having a standardized assessment tool to ensure the curriculum is being taught. Scott believes the examination is an accurate indicator of whether the curriculum is covered. This ties into the concept of a mutually-beneficial relationship between curriculum and evaluation in that a standardized curriculum requires a standardized assessment instrument which in turn confirms that the curriculum is being taught.

While Scott indicated support for a standardized provincial curriculum, he opposed attempts to make this happen on a larger scale. He did not support national or regional standardization such as that of the Western Canadian Protocol attempts which would have seen the social studies curricula in the western provinces and territories adopt a common social studies curriculum. He believed Alberta's requirements in social studies were the most stringent.

> I knew from the beginning that the Western Canada protocol would never work, because Alberta was so far ahead of all the other Western provinces that there are two options. We step down or they step up. Well, it's one province stepping down or two or three stepping up. What's going to happen? Well, you know we were going to have to somehow backtrack and there is no way that I wanted to do that. We have a great curriculum and we are way ahead of the rest. I was really against the Western Canada Protocol because I knew it wouldn't work. The idea is great and in a perfect world we would have one end of the country to the other, the same curriculum and everybody has the same standards. The reality is that the different levels of teaching and the expectation levels currently across the country vary so greatly.
>
> (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004)

My view of the Western Canadian Protocol differed from Scott's. I had supported the concept due to the fact that I originally felt a standardized curriculum would resolve transferability issues for students. My school was a microcosm of the larger trend of increased mobility in society. Students came to my school from all provinces and some states. The differing levels of knowledge and skills evident in the students were marked as those from the different provinces had not only developed different skills but also had assorted knowledge bases which were dissimilar in comparison to the Alberta curriculum. I felt that the standardized curriculum proposed by the Western Canada Protocol would help in ameliorating some of these differences.

The curriculum, the KSAs and responsible citizenship

As we continued our conversations regarding the diploma examination in relation to the curriculum, the KSAs and responsible citizenship arose. Scott suggested that, while the diploma examination adequately measures the portion of the KSAs that it attempts to assess, it does not necessarily measure the full spectrum of skills, abilities or attitudes that a society may expect of a grade 12 student vis-à-vis responsible citizenship.

> If we've decided that this is kind of the amount you need to know to be a responsible citizen, I guess we've achieved that component. We've given them the information. Now, there is so much more than just knowing something to being a responsible citizen and I don't think the social studies program provides for that. I mean that's the goal but do we provide all the skills necessary to provide some of the action component of that we would like to see?
>
> (Conversation 1, 5/7/2004)

The concept of the need for an active participation component in the Social Studies 30 program was further explored. Again, while Scott supports the diploma examination for the rigours and information that it does provide, he believes that active participation has been stunted because of the presence of the examination. The ideal responsible citizen has become involved in various activities that help him or her understand the needs of society and which require action on the part of its citizens. While these types of activities are encouraged throughout the Alberta social studies curriculum, the opportunity to provide a capstone experience in the final course before students assume responsibilities are largely absent due to the demands of the diploma examination.

Using a metaphor drawing on the recent Olympics, Scott argued that it is important to note where the government's priorities lie. As is the relation of our athletes who are minimally supported to train for world competition and the amount of medals won, so is the relationship between what is prescribed to be taught in the classroom and what is realized. If the government wants to emphasize responsible citizenship, then opportunity must be given in all courses for activities that support this. Scott feels that, because of the emphasis on knowledge and skills required for the diploma examination, the overarching goal of responsible citizenship is not being met adequately in Social 30.

> I think that there is so much more freedom in Social 10 and 20 to do some of those things. To maybe take the field trips, to have the mock parliaments, to develop a constitution or look at the election process in more detail. You don't have that in 30. If it hasn't been built in 10 and 20, it is very possible to leave the social studies program in grade 12 and not be that active citizen that we are hoping to achieve.
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

Organization of Social Studies 30

Unity of courses

Scott approaches the organization of Social Studies 30 in a different manner than what would be the standard for any other class. He sees it as the culminating course in social studies in which a rigorous amount of knowledge and an abundance of skills are necessary for the students to do well on the diploma examination. While the knowledge is specific to Social Studies 30, the skills are not and Scott intentionally develops the skills throughout the students' secondary social studies experience. Starting in Social Studies 10, and continuing through 20 and 30, skills are emphasized that are necessary to perform well on the examination so that students are not surprised when they face the diploma examination. Specific test-taking strategies are also introduced at the earlier levels, such as reading comprehension and interpretation in relation to multiple-choice questions as well as focusing on essay-writing strategies, specifically that of the position paper which is the format of the essay on the diploma examination.

Scott's deliberate approach to indicate what is expected on the examination and then building these skills through all grade levels allows the students to spend several semesters developing these skills and thus effectively preparing students for the diploma examination. As I review the way that I taught the course, I realize that having had the same privilege of Scott in teaching in a small school where all social studies courses are taught by the same teacher, I also followed this practice. I attempted to develop those skills required on the examination in the earlier courses. To have students succeed on the diploma examination became the overarching goal and all opportunities to ensure this were taken at all grade levels. In my classroom, right along side the goal of responsible citizenship and possibly supplanting it was the goal of having the students perform well on the examination.

Volume

The one area that is frustrating to Scott and echoed by several other participants throughout the conversations is the immense volume of material that must be covered in the Social Studies 30 course. While Scott is comfortable with the existing diploma examination program, he indicated that if anything needed addressing by the curriculum developers, it was the issue of volume. Pursuing topics more in-depth, pursuing teacher or student interests or capitalizing on important current events are casualties to the amount of curriculum that must be covered. Scott sees the amount of required curricular material in Social Studies 30 as a giant leap compared to the earlier levels and thus feels constrained to organize the course to ensure the content is covered. This emphasis on covering the mandated information leaves the processes and other goals of social studies marginalized.

Scott as confident journeyman

Our conversations were interesting as we discussing the diploma examination and its impact on Scott's teaching practice. It became evident that, with his six years of experience teaching Social Studies 30, as well as Scott's natural interests and his carefully-selected teaching methods, Scott has become a confident journeyman in this field. He has taken the program of studies and built an effective course of study for the grade 12 students facing the high-stakes examination. His emphasis on accountability keeps not only the students focused on their studies but also himself at a level he feels is providing an effective program. As a builder takes the raw materials and fashions them into a usable structure, so Scott takes the curriculum as well as a collection of appropriate artefacts and combines them with effective and efficient teaching strategies to construct a program that builds on the foundations set over several years and provides opportunities for the students to succeed as they face the diploma examination.

Reflections on theory and practice

As I reflect on both Scott's and my experiences I recognize striking similarities. We both used traditional methods of teaching to enable students in their acquisition of knowledge. The goal was to provide the information students would need to perform well on the diploma examination. Our classrooms mirror Aoki's (1996) description of schools where learning is reduced to "acquiring" and where "evaluating" is reduced to measuring the acquired against some preset standardized norm. It was an attempt to provide opportunities for students to excel which many did and which then reflected well on our pedagogical competence. While the methods we used to achieve this fit our teaching identity quite well, it also left the non-diploma examination classes as the only places where the program of instruction had some creativity and variety of methods, even though both of us used these classes as sites for teaching Social Studies 30 skills. It is interesting, that while our practice supports McMillan, Myran and Workman's (1999) assertion that teachers who are required to administer mandated tests change instructional practices, neither Scott nor I felt this to be a negative imposition on our teaching. Rather, the requirements of the diploma examination seemed to justify methods that we felt most comfortable teaching. Our own learning styles were translated into teaching styles that, while traditional and limited in variety, provided the students appropriate knowledge and skills to enable them to perform well on the examination.

Mathison (2001) believes that an appropriate instructional pace is negatively impacted by the presence of standardized examinations. Scott's experience supports this assertion although the entire blame for increased pace is not only placed on the diploma examination but also on the volume of required curriculum in Social Studies 30. Hand in hand, these two factors create a hectic pace in which Scott is loath to give up any time for any interruptions of the class. I was of the same opinion and tried to ensure that there were no intrusions on my time in class. If there were interruptions, it meant that the pace had to be further increased to make up for lost time, which in turn, added to the hectic pace.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
MIKE – THE MASTER CRAFTSMAN

Background

Mike teaches in a public high school that serves the large town as well as the rural areas surrounding it. He has been at this school for over 15 of the 30 years of his teaching career and has served as department head for the last three. In this role, Mike has a unique teaching assignment in that he not only teaches Social Studies 30 but also courses in the Humanities stream which is a combination of the social studies and English curricula at each secondary grade level. He helped develop the Humanities program at his current school and teaches Humanities 30, which prepares students to write the diploma examination for Social Studies 30 as well as English 30. Our conversations revealed two very different pedagogical approaches for the Humanities 30 course as compared to the regular Social Studies 30 course. These themes of difference punctuated our conversations and allowed for a clearer understanding of how two different approaches affect similar results on the diploma examination.

As a child Mike was very interested in history and political science and remembers watching the results of leadership conventions and federal budgets. "I found that stuff very interesting" and "I think that it was just natural that I went in" (Conversation 1, 27/7/2004) to that field professionally. As we explored why we became teachers, Mike related two very important influences in his career decision-making process. His father, an immigrant with only a grade eight education, believed in education strongly and became a role model for Mike. Mike's father had an insatiable appetite for reading and sharing what he had read through discussion with his family. Mike's father was not concerned with what profession his children chose but strongly encouraged them to complete their education to become a professional in some field of study. A second influence came in the form of two social studies teachers who indicated through their classroom personas that an individual could pursue interests in history and political science and be successful as a classroom teacher. For Mike, this opportune discovery allowed him to meld his passions with a career choice in a practical manner.

By the time Mike was in his senior year in high school, he had decided that he would become a social studies teacher. At the University of Alberta he followed this plan and completed a degree in education with a major in social studies, taking courses in several social science areas that confirmed his decision. After his first year of teaching, a move was necessitated due his wife's work requirements and Mike returned to a university in another province where he completed his Master's degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in secondary social studies, defending a project which inquired into teaching controversial issues. Several years later, with more teaching experience under his belt, Mike moved back to Alberta where he has taught secondary social studies since that time. Throughout his teaching career Mike has had extensive experience in marking the Social Studies 30 diploma examination essay component as well as serving on several item-building teams which helped create multiple-choice questions for the examination.

I was introduced to Mike through Sarah. She had suggested his name as a person who might be interested in the research project and, after receiving permission from his principal, I talked with Mike about his potential participation in the study. He readily accepted and our first focus group conversation was held in his classroom. We began the individual conversations in the summer and concluded them well before the responsibilities of the new school year began. Mike reflects that "I enjoyed doing these and I think that because I did them in the summer I was probably more reflective than if I had done it during the school year when one is feeling much more rushed" (Mike's reflective journal). Indeed, the relaxed pace of our conversations as well as the unhurried atmosphere allowed for contemplative and meaningful discussions and reflections on our own teaching practice and how we relate to the impact of the diploma examination.

Experiencing the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30

Competitiveness and self-imposed pressure

Mike views teaching in the high-stakes environment as a challenge and our conversations revealed that he approaches it from a competitive standpoint not only in the quest for achieving exemplary results but also in attempting to have the students perform as well as they can.

> I'm a competitive person. I like to see the kids do well. I like to look at them and see what the provincial average is and see what our average is. It doesn't really change anything, but I'm just kind of a competitive person. I like to look at them and think that my kids have performed well. If they haven't I like to think about what I could do to make it better.
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

This competitiveness and the accompanying concern for the students' performance on the examination and his own competence in transmitting the information indicated Mike is a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983, 1986). In our first group conversation, Mike indicated that he had just arrived back at the school that day from marking the essay component of the examination and immediately began finding students in the hallway to ask them about the examination.

> It's kind of interesting because the question that I would ask the kids was, "Was there anything on the exam that we had not covered?" This was the question that I asked them. "What didn't I cover in the course that was on the exam?"
>
> (First Focus Group Meeting – 24/6/2004).

It appears that Mike's competitive nature provides impetus to achieve pedagogical effectiveness in the classroom as well as serves as a role model. The students view his competitive approach and many adopt a similar attitude in their pursuit of academic excellence. This is evidenced in the fact that Mike's students have consistently done well on the diploma examination over the years.

As we continued our conversations, Mike revealed that his competitive nature mirrored my own experience in that we both produce a self-imposed internal pressure to perform well. He did indicate that he does not let external pressure affect him whether from administration, parents or other sources, which was somewhat different from my own experience where these pressures were not significant but neither were they absent. Mike relates that

> I feel more pressure on myself as far as warning students to do well. I haven't been overly concerned about, and I don't think I lost any sleep about the fact anybody else thought the results were. I always feel pressure because I know the kids have a lot on the line. I don't know, I'm kind of a competitive sort of person and I like to see them do well and I think there is some pressure and I put pressure on myself to make sure I've dealt with

> the information in the course, in the skills, and feel comfortable that I've done most of what I can do to make students prepared for the exam.
>
> (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004)

He indicated that he had not experienced pressure from his administration very often. As we talked about this possibility, he did relate that, one year, the results were not at the provincial average and the administration was concerned but since his students usually performed "fairly well or exceptionally well" (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004), this pressure was not directed at him. Mike did temper these comments with statements indicating that not all teachers in his school had been so fortunate. He indicated that at least one teacher in his school was specifically hired to the teach the diploma examination classes at the grade 12 level but who was reassigned to a different teaching assignment when the results did not meet the administration's approval. This teacher was given other social studies classes to teach and in Mikes opinion remains "a very good" teacher. (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004). Another example of this external pressure on others arose in our conversations. Mike disclosed that another colleague at his school is facing administrative pressure based on diploma examination results and indicates that there is an undue emphasis on this facet of the teacher's performance. (Mike's reflective journal).

Frustration

Mike also acknowledges that the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30 can be frustrating at times. Because of the curricular demands in preparing students for the diploma examination and the limited time constraints, relevant and timely topics and case-studies cannot be explored fully.

> Today I wanted to really take some time and connect. We had student

> council election speeches and then student council elections at noon today, and I really wanted to connect what these kids had at stake in their election speeches and what the kids heard with what Bush and Kerry have going tonight in their debate. I thought, 'I don't have time to do this. I'm still only on chapter four of this textbook. I've got to get through this stuff'. I felt really compromised and it was really relevant to Social 30 and you feel so frustrated at times that you can't do some of the things that seem important. But you have this time period that you've got to get all this stuff into. At times it is frustrating. And I hear that from a lot of people that teach Social 30.
>
> (Final Focus Group Meeting – 30/9/2004)

Frustrations like this were not as common for me. I came to view the diploma examination as the most important item to prepare for and even though there may have been relevant current event material, my focus was on what could be asked on the examination. While I enjoyed discussing current events that related directly to the Social Studies 30 program of studies, I would comment that this material could be a valuable example for the essay component and then move on. As I reflect on not taking further time to explore in-depth some of these relevant items, I recognize that there would have been great benefit to explore these types of subject matter more comprehensively. Although I did not feel frustration when these occurrences would take place, the benefit of slowing down and making connections to students' lives would have been valuable. In retrospect, I can see that valuable opportunities for connecting to current issues were lost or marginalized.

Perceptions of effects

Mike views the recent move to attach the teachers' names to their individual results as a possible way to monitor and evaluate each teacher's performance more closely with a move away from the stated rationale of the assessment focusing on student accountability as well as an improvement tool for the teachers.

> It's interesting what the motives of it are. I think originally, the feeling was that the exam and the results of the exam were to be used as a tool to improve teaching, learning and so forth in the school. But I guess the same argument could be made for making it more specific to teachers. If the results are good or if the results are poor, it also singles out the teachers for that. It sets up in high schools that have a number of teachers teaching Social 30 or Social 33, comparisons between them and that certainly can have some negative effects and can be used for evaluation purposes and those sorts of things, which originally I don't think was the intent of Alberta Learning, and which it still maintains is not the intent.
>
> (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004).

Mike and I agreed that the practice of tying individual teachers to the results of their students may provide the possibility of removing teachers who do not perform to administration's expectations. This has always been the case in small schools where there is only one Social Studies 30 teacher such as in my own case, but the potential for this to happen on a province-wide basis did not exist until this practice was instituted. Unfortunately, if any administration turns this perception into reality, the decision to (re)move a teacher would be based on a single factor, that being diploma examination results, and would not take into account or recognize the multifarious factors of student success or teacher effectiveness. Mike further reflects on this possibility,

> I think that teachers have become more concerned with results now that their names are on the top of the results sheet and the results are now broken down both by school and individual classes. So we know the level of concern is high for teachers.
>
> (Mike's reflective journal)

Mike also feels there are other ways the diploma examination impacts teachers including the fact that some teachers do not want to expose themselves to this pressurized environment and simply refuse to teach any class that has a diploma examination attached to it. "We have teachers in our school who don't want to have anything to do with diploma examinations" (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004).

Our third and final focus group conversation explored words that described the high-stakes environment of Social Studies 30. As Mike reviewed those descriptors he recognized that while he does not experience the high-stakes environment of the diploma examinations in exactly the same way that the other research participants do, there is a certainly a shared understanding of what it means to be a teacher in this milieu and the profound effects it has on each one.

> Positive, intense, focused, energized, and frustrating were the words that came out. I can identify with all of those words when teaching Social 30; it just depends on the time and circumstances. All of the words are ones that describe a situation that certainly is not relaxed. It makes me wonder whether it is a certain personality profile that ends up being Social 30

> teachers. The words indicate an emotional roller coaster that we all seem to be on when teaching Social 30. I thought that I was a concerned, competitive Social teacher, but it was interesting to hear about someone like Sarah who almost makes herself sick worrying about how her students will do on the exams. I am concerned, but have never had the feeling of being sick over it. I guess that I rationalize this by thinking that I have done the best job I could, so it is up to the students to perform on the exam.
>
> (Mike's reflective journal)

These same descriptors provide a picture of what the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination was for me, also. I experienced the intensity, the energy and some frustrations depending on what was happening. But overall, the experience of teaching in this environment was a stimulating and positive experience for me. I viewed it as an opportunity to prove my teaching skills through the confirmation of an external measure. As I review my experiences, I believe there should be a more appropriate balance between student and teacher interests and that of an intense focusing on the diploma examination and the student results.

Teaching identity

Mike's teaching identity emerged throughout the conversations as we explored the various aspects of his approaches to teaching and the areas in which his preferences lie. While he enjoys the traditional approach of Social Studies 30, his real interest and enjoyment lies with the Humanities 30 program. Although he has to prepare students for two diploma examinations in this course, he feels that he takes a pedagogical approach much more aligned to his preferred teaching identity. In this course he focuses on student-centred learning and interests and less on the traditional purveying of knowledge. Because of this difference, this course has become his personal favourite but he realizes that the Humanities program is allowed to continue because of the students' success on the diploma examination. He believes that because students, parents and administration view this success as the ultimate factor in class choice, the Humanities program would be a casualty to this demand if results from the program were not adequate.

Mike relates that teachers from other schools came to observe his program and receive help in setting up Humanities programs at their school, but most of these programs foundered because they refused to take the risk of introducing Humanities 30 due to the perception that students would not be successful on the diploma examinations if they attempted to write them after taking the Humanities 30 course. Mike believes and his experience indicates that students are as successful as their Social Studies 30 counterparts if not more so. High student achievement in this course provides Mike with the satisfaction that he can present the curricular material closer to his favoured pedagogical approach, which reflects his teaching identity more accurately and still provides a solid foundation for student success on the high-stakes examinations. Willingness to risk is certainly a component of Mike's teaching identity since there is not one, but two diploma examinations at stake in the Humanities 30 program.

Our conversations revealed that Mike believes teacher identity is significantly affected by several external forces. First, he sees it influenced by the administration that chooses the teachers who will teach a high-stakes course based on a belief that the teacher will be successful. This especially relates to diploma examination courses such as

Socials 30 or Humanities 30. Parents and students may also impact a teacher's identity because in Mike's school, administration allows students and/or parents to select which classes the students will attend. Through this practice the students and parents make a deliberate choice usually based on which teacher they prefer. "If you are sitting with nobody in your class year after year, obviously it is hard on the identity and so you get a reputation as a good social teacher or not" (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004). Mike feels that, as siblings pass through the school, a teacher's identity is established with the first child. The rest of the siblings may or may not choose the teacher depending on the oldest child's experience in that class. He sees the selection process by students creating a teaching identity that may or may not be accurate but certainly is perception by both students and parents.

In contrast to Mike's experience, teacher choice by parents and students was not available in my school since I was the only social studies teacher. I believe that being the only teacher certainly did add pressures because I knew that I had to attempt to meet each student's learning style while preparing them for the examination. There was no choice for them to switch to another teacher within the school. This added to my perception that I needed to have students perform well on the examination for two reasons. I felt I needed to ensure all students did well but I also saw exemplary results as a defense if a student or parent came with complaints. I could show them the results and defend my practices in the classroom.

Impact on pedagogy

Divergent approaches

As we delved into pedagogical approaches, it became evident that Mike's teaching methods are considerably different in the Humanities stream than in the traditional Social Studies 30 course and are not impacted by the diploma examination as much as the regular course. As was mentioned, Mike enjoys this approach more and is moving away from the transmission of knowledge to a more student-centred approach with more elements of active participation.

> I teach my humanities very different than I teach the Social 30, with Social 30 being much more structured and covering material and testing and all that traditional sort of stuff. Humanities 30 is much more writing based, presentation based, evaluation sort of thing and very few multiple choice questions.
>
> (Conversation 1, 27/7/2004)

Mike describes himself as a facilitator rather than a transmitter of knowledge in the Humanities 30 class. Students are given group assignments and projects in which they become the "experts" and teach the other students. Mike reveals that he feels that he gets in the way of the students if he attempts to present information through a traditional approach that he would use in Social Studies 30. The rationale for the two approaches lies in the type of learner he has in each stream. Mike indicates that the students who register for the Social Studies 30 class usually learn better from traditional methods of lecture and teacher-led activities whereas the Humanities students' learning styles respond better to a student-centred group approach. While Mike notes that student results in both streams have been above provincial average, the results in the Humanities stream seem to be consistently higher than in the regular social studies track. He reflects on the possible reasons for this.

> I think that there are a couple of reasons for that. One is I think that giving students more options to adjust to their learning style works. Secondly, Humanities 30 runs all year in conjunction with their English 30. As a result it seems that it is not as rushed as it is in a semestered course.
>
> (Mike's reflective journal)

In comparing the two different approaches, Mike sees positive and negative aspects about both approaches.

> Talking about Social 30, I think there are some things that are positive. I think when the kids see that there is 30% writing on a essay, they're motivated to learn to write the essay properly and to improve writing skills which to me is a lot more important than content so that's a positive thing. I'm not sure that we would have that motivation if we didn't have the exam. Now the negative thing is covering this material for material's sake rather then for good reasons. I would say that's the positive and the negative in it. In humanities we cover stuff because it's a way to work on skills and I think we end up being successful learning the information. Maybe even better than in Social 30.
>
> (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004)

Pedagogical dilemmas

As we wove our conversations through issues surrounding the effect that the diploma examination has on pedagogy, Mike expressed concern over several dilemmas he faces in his classroom and their impact on his teaching methods. One of his foremost concerns is for the students and how they will fare in the high-stakes environment especially, with the time-pressures placed by the curriculum requirements in preparing students for the diploma examination.

> Because of the pace, I think that for the students that struggle, they find it almost overwhelming. And they do find it overwhelming. You don't have a whole lot of time to work with them in a class of 30-32 students. As a result, you may be doing a lot of work out of class with students who are very motivated and the ones that do need the help and that are not motivated to do that, they get left behind pretty quickly.
>
> (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004)

I experienced this same problem with pace. The voluminous amount of material makes the pace of coverage much greater than in other courses. This impacts students who are weaker and require more assistance. They seem to get left behind and find it harder to keep up with the rest of the class. While I made every effort to provide extra assistance to these students, many times they did not have the motivation to seek it. One common suggestion to students, struggling because of the pace, was to switch to Social Studies 33 where they still had a diploma examination but where the pressures were not as great. In fact, having the students for three years, I would try and weed the weaker ones out before they got to the Social Studies 30 course. As I have talked with other teachers, this seems to be the normal practice.

Mike also believes that it is not the best pedagogical practice to take a checklist approach to teaching and check off everything that needs to be covered. While it ensures coverage of the curriculum, it does not allow adequate time to address student needs and interests. Mike regards this as covering trivia rather than what really matters to the students or the teacher. He views this dilemma as an unfortunate situation for a teacher because students have shifted their interests from significant issues that are appropriate for social studies classes to how well they will perform on the diploma examination. This then shifts the pedagogical focus in the class from best practice to an approach where the teacher ensures students can achieve their very best on the examination since "that's the only thing that anybody looks at, unfortunately" (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004).

A concomitant dilemma Mike has to deal with personally and feels that others would also face is using convenient teaching methods to ensure the material is covered because such efficient methods promise complete coverage of the curriculum. He feels in his own experience, and sees in that of others, the pressures to get things done so that "they do not change their teaching practices even when they know there may be a better way of doing it" (Mike's reflective journal). This is directly tied to the dilemma of volume of curricular material in the Social Studies 30 course. Because of the significant amount of material, Mike feels that a teacher can only approach it by covering it quickly rather than thoroughly. It becomes a trade-off between efficiently moving through the curricular material, emphasizing the examinable parts, and employing best teaching practice.

> The best way of teaching, it takes time. Sometimes at the 30 level you feel that you don't have time, so sometimes what might have been really good to have done some research or some presentations or have some speakers in, you put it on the overhead, talk about it and go on to the next thing. We've covered the material and that's all the time we have in Socials 30. I think the kids kind of miss out and that we are teaching for the exam and

> not for the skills and not for the content that would be helpful to students.
>
> (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004)

Mike believes this pedagogical approach requires a classroom teacher in a high-stakes environment to become a purveyor of knowledge. He asserts that, even though the majority of Social Studies 30 teachers would not necessarily admit they fit this category, in reality that is what they become. Mike sees himself much more this way in the regular stream of social studies than in his Humanities 30 class. "I'm clawing my way to the left if you think of it that way. That's where I want to be. I don't want to be dictated by the exam" (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004).

As I view Mike's comments regarding teachers becoming purveyors of knowledge, I certainly place myself in this category. Providing the information students would need to perform well on the diploma examination was paramount in my curricular and pedagogical choices. The examination certainly dictated what happened in my classroom and I believe most Social Studies 30 teachers would have to admit that they are impacted with these same kinds of pressures.

Besides the pressures to "teach to the exam", Mike also asserts that the diploma examination has not kept up to current learning theory and practice. He believes the examination is a content-based reading exercise which is inconsistent with current learning theories regarding brain-based and student learning.

> What we know about learning now and what we knew in 1984, when the first diploma exams came out, about how the brain operates and about how students learn and that sort of thing, should be making us teach things a lot differently. The format of the diploma exam has not changed since

> 1984. There's nothing that has changed. They have made it more difficult, because teachers have gotten a lot better at teaching towards that exam.
>
> (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004)

Mike summarizes these dilemmas into the statement that the diploma examination is driving classroom pedagogy.

> Even though one likes to think that the diploma exam is not driving what they are doing in the classroom if an individual is honest, it really is. We don't really seem to be able to discuss or do anything with respect to Social 30/33 without coming back to the diploma exam. Whether it is writing position papers, what material to cover, the pace of covering material, it all seems to come down to whether it is going to help students with being successful on the exam.
>
> (Mike's reflective journal)

Curricular impact

Reductionism

As we continued our conversations, the effect that the diploma examination has on the delivered curriculum was also explored. One of Mike's major concerns is that, because of the voluminous content in Social Studies 30, the curriculum becomes a mirrored image of the textbook rather than the complete program of studies. He further believes that, if a teacher fails to cover the material in the textbook so the students can do well on the multiple-choice component of the examination, he or she is doing a disservice to the students. The textbooks have become the lived curriculum.

> I really strongly believe, when I look at the diploma exam over the years,

> the two textbooks are the curriculum as far as the exam writers are concerned and not the curriculum. When you go through the curriculum, if you taught what was on the curriculum, you would spend a lot of time doing stuff that you didn't need to do for that exam and they very much have made the *Global Forces(2004)* and *Ideologies(1997)* books what is needed to know. So, of course, a lot of teachers, and I do that too, we make sure that the main idea in those books are covered.
>
> (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004)

Mike's description accurately illustrates my approach. The textbooks were king in my classroom and I followed them almost religiously to ensure students were provided the correct information. During our conversations, I asked participants to provide an artefact that helped describe their pedagogical approaches in Social Studies 30. My artefact was the textbook because I felt it clearly reflected my approach to this class. Purveying the information from the textbook became the standard method of teaching for me and I would say this was in large part due to the presence of the diploma examination.

Mike feels that this leads to a reductionary approach to curriculum as it compels teachers to focus on what they believe is going to be asked on the examination rather than what is actually in the curriculum.

> I would say that I am more concerned about what they are going to ask on the test rather than what is in the curriculum. With Social 20 or Social 10, I would be looking at the curriculum and saying that these are important knowledge objectives, skill objectives, and attitude objectives. These are

> the most important ones and these are the ones that I am going to emphasize. Whereas, in Social 30, I think you look at it and go, 'What are they going to ask on the test? What are they going to need to know for the test', and make your decisions that way.
>
> (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004)

In our third conversation Mike used the example of teaching about the Middle East. This would be an excellent case-study based on the Social Studies 30 curriculum but, as Mike asked, "Am I going to spend three weeks dealing with the situation in the Middle East, when there hasn't been a question on the Middle East in the last three years on the diploma exam"? (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004). It is evident that the examination dictates what curriculum will be emphasized. This approach was also mirrored in my own experience. I did not want to take the time to delve into topics which would not appear on the examination.

As we discussed the full array of KSAs required by the program of studies and the emphasis a teacher would place on each curricular area, Mike indicated that the diploma examination was heavily biased towards the knowledge component of the curriculum. He sees the multiple-choice section as a reading and vocabulary test where the primary skills being assessed are reading and knowledge of vocabulary. The essay portion of the examination does allow for certain skills to be developed such as writing or interpretation but, because 70% of the examination is multiple-choice, the knowledge component tends to be emphasized in greater proportion than the other curricular components. Mike feels that it would be preferable to focus on the skills necessary for success in university and for life in general, rather than emphasize knowledge students may not need to access again. “I think the kids kind of miss out when we are teaching for the exam and not for the skills and not for the content that would be helpful to students” (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004). This minimalization of skills and attitudes lessens the opportunity to emphasize citizenship within the Social Studies 30 program.

On the other hand, Mike emphasized that, because of the diploma examination, students are not interested in developing those skills that are not necessary to succeed on the examination. The high-stakes attached change the students’ mindset to demanding only that information that will give them what they feel they need to know for the examination. Their attitude becomes

> “Cut to the chase. Give me what I need to know, because I’m trying to get into engineering or I’m trying to get into something and I need an 85% average, so you teach this so I can get the mark on that diploma exam that I need to get my scholarship, or to get my entrance or whatever. All this other stuff is frills”.
>
> (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004).

Mike sees this attitude prevailing among the academically-inclined students who have a lot on the line. The result of this attitude is that it has a marginalizing effect on citizenship, the ultimate purpose of socials studies, as well as the other skills and attitudes in the Social Studies 30 program of studies. I experienced this in my classroom also. The students were focused on what would be on the examination and, if they felt that the material would not be tested, they had no interest in learning it. Their focus was on the material required for the diploma examination and that is what they wanted to concentrate on, leaving the extraneous material aside.

Curricular creep

Our conversations delved into both curricular reductionism and the accompanying phenomenon of curriculum creep due in part to the diploma examination. Mike sees this occurring in two significant ways. This phenomenon emerges due to the fact that during the last two decades the secondary social studies curriculum in Alberta has not changed substantially. Today over 20 years of history has passed since the introduction of the diploma examinations in 1984 and, while some material was transferred to the Socials 20 program, significant world events such as the fall of communism and the rise of terrorism have expanded the historical portion of the Social Studies 30 curriculum. This places demands on the teacher to transmit more information in the same period of time and prepare students for the diploma examination with an ever-expanding expectation of curricular coverage.

A second manner in which curricular creep is evident at Mike's school is the effort the social studies department makes in coordinating the entire secondary program so that students will be exposed to the different skills, not just in Social Studies 30 but in 10 and 20 as well. This certainly parallels my own experience. Being the only teacher of all three of these classes, the synchronization of major skills was easier. However, even in the multi-teacher department Mike chairs, an intentional effort is made to infuse all levels of the secondary social studies experience with the skills required on the diploma examination. What is expected at the 30 level is now filtering down to the lower grade levels to help ensure success on the examination. The unfortunate aspect is there are valuable components of the earlier courses that do not focus on examination knowledge or skills, so are not covered in a meaningful manner or possibly not at all.

Organization of Social Studies 30

Continuing the conversation of how the entire secondary social studies program is focused on helping students do well on the diploma examination, Mike revealed that he organizes his secondary social studies program as a complete package with the earlier two secondary grades providing time and support to the 30-level expectations. He described three essential elements that characterize the three years of study the students spend in his department and how these meld together into one social studies program for the entire secondary experience of the student. The three areas of emphasis stemming from the Social Studies 30 curriculum include writing position papers, emphasis on vocabulary for the multiple-choice section of the examination and providing connections between appropriate historical, economic and political case-studies, the theories that they are based on and current world events.

In Mike's school, organization of the writing component begins in grade 10 where students are introduced to the expectations of the diploma examination's position paper through the writing of paragraphs which include some of the basic elemental structures of the examination's essay component. At the grade 11 level, students are introduced to a full-length position paper with the grade 12 becoming experienced writers of this requirement. This approach to preparation for the essay component paralleled my own experience in a single-member department.

Mike and the other social studies teachers have also identified the vocabulary necessary for students to know on the diploma examination. Again, any terms that can be dealt with in Social Studies 10 and 20 are emphasized so they are fully familiar to students when they are in the 30 course. The last area of emphasis is on helping students understand and develop appropriate case-studies so they can develop insightful connections with examples to support their position on the examination. Mike, along with the other teachers in his department, attempt to have students start thinking in this vein in grade 10 and 11 so that not only does it make history more relevant but also provides an opportunity for the students to connect with current events. These three areas of emphasis over the complete secondary school experience contribute to preparing students to write the diploma examination.

Mike as master craftsman

Once again, to invoke the construction metaphor, a master craftsman is a person able to visualize the end product before the onset of the project. The ability to adapt appropriate methods and procedures to mould the end product into a masterpiece is a part of the master craftsman's repertoire of strategies. The capacity to take raw materials and fashion them into a successful conclusion is also what it takes to be considered worthy of this title.

Only certain teachers have been able to achieve the pedagogical equivalent of a master craftsman. These teachers can take the raw products of curricular expectations and program requirements and shape an effective program for student success. They see what the end-product looks like and hone their teaching methods and skills to ensure students are well-equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to become successful. Depending on the students' needs, interests and learning styles, different approaches are utilized to maximize the potential for success. As students need to learn in a various ways, an appropriate pedagogical program is prepared to capitalize on their learning styles. The ability to view the end product before the program is planned makes a master craftsman successful. As Mike has taught the Social Studies 30 course for many years, he has focused on student needs through both the traditional format and through a unique learning system provide by the Humanities program. Through either approach and under Mike's master craftsmanship, students are well-prepared for the ultimate test known as the diploma examination.

Reflections on theory and practice

Mike's experience supports Kohn's (2000b) assertion that students care only if they get the right answer rather than how they arrive at it. Students are not necessarily interested in understanding why they arrived at an answer, but rather they are satisfied knowing what the answer is as long as it is one that will possibly be on the diploma examination. While Mike's humanity classes are more pedagogically exploratory in nature, students still want to be assured that the curricular component is directly related to the examination.

Parker's (1996) and Myer's (2004) notion of curricular reductionism rings true for Mike. He sees the materials that could be on the diploma examination as the main area of concentration rather than the entire curriculum. This approach is taken in Social Studies 30 because of the presence of the high-stakes examination. Areas of interest in the curriculum that are not easily testable are ignored, while curricular components likely to be on the examination are emphasized. The other form of curricular reductionism in Mike's classes comes through emphasizing skills required for the diploma examination in the pre-requisite classes of Social Studies 30. In Social Studies 10 and 20, the skills needed in the 30 level course are emphasized and those others are marginalized.

Therefore, even in other classes, the curriculum is reduced to skills helpful for students on the diploma examination.

Mike's approach to teaching is varied because of the two classes he teaches that require the diploma examination. He approaches the Social Studies 30 course in a traditional manner because it is a semesterized course as opposed to his year-long Humanities 30 class. While the social studies component of Humanities 30 is coupled with English Language Arts 30, it is covered over the entire school year and allows more time for students to acquire and assimilate appropriate knowledge and skills. The overlap of writing skills in English and social studies also provides more time to concentrate on other material and utilize more creative pedagogical methods more along Mike's teaching identity. Britzman's (2003) notion regarding teacher identity and how external expectations and one's own beliefs as a teacher create tensions is evident in Mike's experience. His teaching identity is more closely aligned with the Humanities 30 approach and, while he is attempting to move his Social Studies 30 course in this direction, it is with some difficulty. The tensions created are recognized but interestingly, not enough for Mike to want to step out of teaching in this high-stakes environment.

CHAPTER NINE:
REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING IN A HIGH-STAKES ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to discover how teachers experience teaching a senior level social studies course in the high-stakes environment of state-mandated examinations and to determine what impact the examination has on teacher pedagogy. During the course of this research, each participant had the opportunity to examine how he or she experienced this environment and the resultant affects on practice. While these understandings are personal, they also provide a clearer idea of what teachers in this pressurized milieu experience. Each participant, including myself, spoke from his or her private world of practice; however, commonalities have emerged that signal the possibility of resonance with other Social Studies 30 teachers. Sarah, Bill, Scott and Mike's narratives, as well as my own experience in the Social Studies 30 classroom, are stories of individual teachers functioning within the high-stakes environment of the diploma examinations. With this in mind, it is important to note that commonalities of experience exist among the research participants, even with our divergent backgrounds and pedagogical approaches. These common experiences may speak to other teachers, who also have chosen to meet the challenges of teaching the Social Studies 30 diploma examination course.

Although each teacher individually experiences the demands of teaching in a high-stakes environment in a unique, personalized manner, these diverse experiences may speak to the experiences of all teachers in similar contexts. Individual teachers negotiate the tensions of this complex environment differently and yet face similar challenges.

Attempting to balance personal pedagogical and curricular approaches vis-à-vis state-mandated programs of study and assessment is no small feat. Experiencing the stresses of preparing students to perform well on the diploma examination while recognizing that students' results may be perceived as a reflection on teaching efficacy as much as student competence, along with attempting to provide the appropriate foundational skills for responsible citizenship while emphasizing the content of the examination are significant challenges that all Social Studies 30 teachers face. The combination of these complex factors result in different pedagogical approaches for each teacher, but the commonalities of experience also provide a clearer picture of what it means to teach in this high-stakes environment.

The complex environment of assessment

Negotiating a sense of identity within the high-stakes environment

From within this environment, teachers must negotiate their own senses of identity as they enact the curriculum (Britzman, 2003). Suppressing one's own subjectivities to conform to an external requirement may create internal, conflictual attacks on one's teaching identity, but each research participant realizes this impact to varying degrees and none of the contributors to the study found the effects of the diploma examination on their teaching identity onerous enough to warrant the removal of high-stakes examinations. While the examination was not viewed as being without fault, it is seen by all five participants as a necessary requirement of the Social Studies 30 program and was viewed both as an external constraint on teachers' identity as well as an affirmation of it.

Through the narratives we shared, we were able to further develop a "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, 1999), exploring our teaching identities contextualized within the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination and the tensions between personal styles and external expectations. All the teachers involved in the research came away with an understanding of their own pedagogical selves in relation to the examination requirements in a clearer manner than before engaging in the conversations. Participants felt that the research had provided the opportunity to recognize their teaching identities while softening the negative stresses brought on by the diploma examination (Final Focus Group, 30/9/200[illegible]). By extension, we believe our narratives provide an opportunity to help those in similar teaching assignments reflect on how they position their own teaching selves relative to the diploma examination.

Teachers framing of social studies

Reflecting on the social studies spectrum, which provides an understanding of the continuums of transmission of culture/knowledge and active involvement/participation as well as content and process (Richardson, personal communication, January 23, 2003) it has become more apparent where diploma examinations in the Alberta social studies secondary program place teachers on this spectrum. All participants feel that the format and expectations of the examination require the teacher to emphasize content and transmission of culture and knowledge over process and active participation. From the conversations with the research participants, it was generally evident that the goal of the teachers is to include more active participation and an emphasis on the development of process skills but the sheer volume of curricular material to be covered in the Social Studies 30 program of studies minimizes these possibilities. While attempts are made by all the teachers to include some forms of active participation, the degree to which this is realized is significantly hampered by the curricular demands of the Social Studies 30 program in preparing students for the examination.

The inclusion of process skills is more easily accomplished than developing students' active involvement and participation due to the fact that the essay/multiple choice format of the diploma examinations demands that students demonstrate various higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving. However, the locus of attention of the examination still seems to be content mastery, whether it is to meet the demand of knowledge to successfully answer the multiple choice component or the ability to defend one's position through the use of quality examples on the essay. As a result, classroom teaching emphasizes content knowledge to a larger extent than developing process skills. These factors help reinforce and confirm the epistemic beliefs about the nature of knowledge as being a body of human wisdom accumulated and tempered over time that must be passed on from one generation to the next (Cuban, 1993) but they certainly do not encourage the active involvement through enlightened political engagement that many such as Parker (2001) envision as the goal of social studies. The research participants, including myself, realize that a move toward a more balanced approach of active involvement/participation and process in conjunction with transmission of culture/knowledge would enhance the current Social Studies 30 program and would not preclude an assessment component which could be designed to be more amenable to all these elements.

Reflexivity

Valuable insights emerged regarding the manner in which the diploma examination reconfigured our pedagogy. Throughout our conversations the notion of the examination as an external measure was universally accepted by all participants as a form of accountability. For Sarah and Scott, accountability to students and external stakeholders is accepted as a component of a teacher's responsibilities to the constituencies which he or she serves. I, along with Mike and Bill, viewed the requirements of the diploma examination as a form of personal accountability where we could measure our students' results, and by extension, our pedagogy by a standard external to us. The examination provided a yardstick for comparison although we preferred this tool to be for self-assessment. Thus, there were no significant objections to standardized examinations being an integral part of the Social Studies 30 curriculum even though the participants acknowledged that the examination created unique pressures each teacher had to reconcile with his or her beliefs about teaching. In looking at the effects of the examination on each teacher's identity and classroom practice, it is evident that the diploma examination is used as a measure of the effectiveness of each teacher's own pedagogy. If students do well, teachers feel their teaching effectiveness is affirmed. Mike summarized the participants' feelings well when he stated "I feel good when they do well" (Conversation 2, 10/8/2004). This was the consensus of the group. The primary objective for any of the teachers was to encourage students to perform at the pinnacle of their ability and to celebrate their accomplishments. But accompanying this is the affirmation of the teachers' pedagogical approaches and teaching identity since the results are also viewed as a confirmation of effective teaching.

Each of us also views the students' results as a validation of our practice. As students, parents, administrators and the media perceive the results of the diploma examination as validating the effectiveness of the teacher, so the teacher also, whether agreeing with it or not, considers the examination results as validation of practice because this is how it is viewed by others. While each research group member talked about having the results consistently above provincial average, it was generally viewed that superior results confirmed each teacher's specific approach in the classroom. Whether it was Sarah's learning centres, Scott's use of historical artefacts, Bill's inclusion of personal narrative, or Mike's relevant illustrations, each believed these pedagogical approaches led to exemplary student results on the examination and therefore could be seen as a validation of each teacher's personalized approach. It needs to be noted that each teacher also regretted the fact they could not include more of these types of presentations in the Social Studies 30 class because of the need to ensure the curricular material was covered in preparing the students for the diploma examination. Each research participant noted that specific skills are emphasized and required for students to do well on the test, but in the program of studies other equally important skills and attitudes are minimalized or ignored since they are not easily testable and therefore are absent on the examination.

Reflection on themes

Our conversations revolved around four themes, which addressed how we experienced the high-stakes environment of the diploma examination, its impact on our pedagogical practices as well as that of the curriculum and how we organized our Social Studies 30 classes to meet the demands of the examination. Each participant's unique experience led to an understanding of what it means to teach in this context along with the pressures that each experienced. Our narratives spoke to a common experience that challenges all teachers of Social Studies 30.

Experiencing the high-stakes environment

The divergent viewpoints of supporters and detractors of high-stakes testing provide a background of how Social Studies 30 teachers experience this environment. The arguments that this context requires both students and teachers to focus their attention more on the prescribed curriculum (Parker, 1996) and for teachers to take education more seriously by preparing their lessons more accurately and concisely (Luijten, 1991) appears to be the case with all the participants. Our conversations indicated that this is in relation only to that material that may be on the examination and this demand of the examination limits the opportunity to explore other topics, issues, skills and attitudes within the scope of the Social Studies 30 program of study.

Arguments in favour of using the examinations to reduce inequities due to all students being required to take a standardized curriculum with an accompanying assessment (Nathan, 2002) seem to ring hollow in the experience of the participants. While one could argue that equity is achieved because each student faces the same curricular and assessment expectations, this does not recognize the individual needs and learning styles of students. If anything regarding equity can be drawn from these experiences it appears that there is less opportunity for this to occur because enhancement and enrichment of curricular expectations are limited due to standardized assessment requirements.

For equity to be achieved, each student should have the opportunity to learn to his or her fullest extent. This may require different pedagogical methods to meet different learning styles. For each student to do to his or her best, varied curricular and pedagogical approaches may have to be taken by the teacher for this goal to be realized.

The demands of the diploma examination diminish the possibilities of meeting individual needs and thus a full equality of opportunity for each student is not realized. A wide variety of perspectives existed regarding equity among the research participants. Bill sees the standardized assessment program as a method to develop common understandings and provide a more equitable experience for students and teachers. All participants indicated a concern for equitable educational opportunities for students, not only in the diploma examination course, but in all courses they teach.

The notion of accountability being equivalent to how students perform on the diploma examinations (Cheng & Couture, 2000) and the accompanying idea that the high-stakes examination is a valuable instrument to identify teachers' strengths and weakness (Sclafani, 2002) are not seen as negative by most participants. Sarah indicates that she holds a very high standard for herself in all her pedagogy and would expect administrators to maintain this level of expectation in relation to accountability for her and other teachers. She sees that standardized assessment provides a vehicle to ensure accountability happens. What she expects of herself she is willing to allow others to also expect of her. Scott displays a similar attitude, and adds that it is something he values not only for himself but also for students, teachers and school systems. The diploma examination program provides this opportunity. While Bill, Mike and I regard accountability as important, it is a self-driven accountability that is an essential component of our teaching selves. We hold high expectations for ourselves and translate these into pedagogical approaches consistent with standardized assessment.

Critics of standardized assessment claim decreased student motivation is the unfortunate result of high-stakes assessment (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). None of the participants noted this to be an adverse effect but rather observed that students seem to be motivated to work at a higher level than in a class where a diploma examination was not present. Thus, in opposition to this notion, participants concurred that students work harder and are generally motivated to do well on the examination.

One issue raised with the diploma examination which creates frustration with the participants is the fact that student results can only be used as a diagnostic tool for the next group of students and the examination is ineffective in providing timely information regarding current students (Myers, 2004). Sarah indicated that it would be more effective if the examination itself could serve this purpose. This could potentially happen if the previous year's diploma examinations were more readily available for teachers to use as samples to provide a diagnostic tool for problematic areas.

Probably the most interesting understandings to emerge from our conversations revolved around the attitudes of the participants towards the high-stakes test. While some argue that these types of examinations create a confining and restrictive influence on teacher practice (Popham, 2001), this negative attitude toward the examination was not reflected by the research participants. Sarah finds the experience energizing and intense, although she clarifies, not in a negative sense. Bill views the examinations as highly desirable because of the perception of keeping his pedagogical tools sharpened each time he teaches the course. Scott also supports the diploma examination program and, while Mike finds it frustrating at times, he does not envision removing standardized testing from the Social Studies 30 program. My own attitude towards the examinations was affirmed through these conversations in that I also viewed the diploma examination experience as positive. All participating teachers believed the current assessment program is a strong component of the current social studies program although they also believe it can be improved to reflect a broader range of skills and attitudes that reflect current learning theories.

Our conversations made it abundantly clear that teaching in a high-stakes environment is pressure filled. There are distinctive stresses each participant teacher feels and each teacher responds differently to this pressure in his or her unique way. The participants view these stresses across a spectrum from motivating pedagogical excellence to an irritant, but one which can be managed. Several participants found the pressure a positive motivator for students as they attempted to achieve their best on the diploma examinations and for the teachers themselves who craft the pedagogical and curricular program to allow for this. While these findings are limited to the participant group, statements made during the conversations suggested that some participants were aware of teachers who moved to other less pressure-filled areas of teaching either by personal choice or by administrative action. However, the demands are not pressing enough with participants to create a situation in which they want to give up the opportunity to teach a course within a high-stakes context.

Impact on pedagogy

A driving question of the research dealt with how the diploma examinations have affected teacher practice. Sacks (1999) and Sheppard (2002) indicate that, in a high-stakes environment, an overabundance of teaching to the test's content and format takes place and a holistic approach to pedagogy is lost where the complex whole is replaced by a focusing on the parts of the whole. The narrowing of emphasis to that which is testable and a reduction in pedagogical approaches is evident in all the participants' classrooms.

Our conversations revealed that Sarah, Bill and Mike realize this restriction on personal pedagogy while trying to resist it and conversely Scott and I feel comfortable teaching within this restrictive environment in that it mirrors our own learning and teaching styles and identities. Sarah, while making cooperative learning an integral part of her pedagogy, does not find the opportunity to implement this style of teaching as much as she does in her other classes and definitely not as much as she would like to do. She indicated that she includes more lecturing in Social Studies 30 because it is a more efficient manner to cover the required material. She does not view this as a result of having to prepare the students for the diploma examination but rather as a result of the excessive volume of curricular material in the course itself.

Bill also indicated that his collection of pedagogical methods is different due to the presence of the diploma examination. He views the increased rigour involved as positive and considers the reduction of methods as only marginally negative. Scott narrows his pedagogy to mainly a lecture format. He indicated this is his preferred method of teaching and, while he ensures that he becomes more pedagogically creative in his Social Studies 10 and 20 classes, he believes the lecture method is the most efficient manner to cover the required information for the examination.

My own experience of "narrowing" my teaching is similar to that of Mike, Bill, Sarah and Scott. When I taught Social Studies 30, I attempted to vary my approaches in the classroom but I felt that the volume of material along with the demands of the examination reduced the pedagogical choices I could make. From conversing with Scott, it appears that styles of teaching were parallel and that we felt confident in our approach, even though it meant we would employ less variety in teaching methods than we used in our non-diploma examination classes.

Mike's experience is intriguing in that he teaches the 30 level course in two different formats. In Social Studies 30 he believes that classroom pedagogy is being driven by the examination not only in his classroom but in many other teachers' classrooms as well. On the other hand, his Humanities 30 course in which Social Studies 30 and English 30 are taught as a combined subject allows him to employ a variety of methods that are student-centred and allow for much more pedagogical freedom.

The results on the diploma examination confirm that these are as effective, or more so, than the more limited traditional approach he takes in Social Studies 30. While this seems to indicate that it is possible to incorporate different teaching styles in a course with a high-stakes examination such as Social Studies 30 and still have students achieve successful results, Mike did indicate why he taught the traditional course different than his Humanities course. He believes that having the luxury of a full year with the Humanities course, rather than a semester, allows students to comprehend the concepts better. Along with this is the fact, that because English and social studies curricula have a significant amount of overlap, especially when dealing with writing, time efficiencies can be realized by teaching certain concepts that apply to both courses, a "killing two birds with one stone" approach. Thus time spent in covering the same concepts when the courses are separated is reduced when they are taught together in the Humanities format.

Other concerns regarding impact of pedagogy include the hectic pace that is required to ensure all curricular material is covered on the diploma examination. All participants felt that a strict timeline and more rigid pace were necessary to provide a quality program which enable students to do well on the examination. Highly-motivated students usually rise to this new level of expectation, but those who may be indifferent to their educational program or who need additional time and help are disadvantaged due to this reality.

Another area of concern is that of a reduction in opportunities to meet individual students' needs, learning styles and interests and an accompanying diminishing of creativity by both teacher and student. This can easily lead to a transmission of knowledge approach to teaching where the teacher largely becomes a purveyor of information. Mike and Sarah indicate that they seek to prevent this from happening, but the end result is that they are not completely successful in their attempts. Further exacerbating this tendency towards transmission of the knowledge that is required on the examination are the students' attitudes. They appear to shift their focus from significant issues to the information that will enable them to perform well on the examination. This, in turn, impacts teacher practice by moving away from a complex combination of pedagogical methods to ones of convenience which ensure the content is covered.

Another frustration for some participants is the lack of attempt to synchronize the diploma examination with current learning theory and practice. As Mike pointed out, the examination is over two decades old and has not changed in format significantly. While it may have reflected the learning theories of the mid 1980's, new understandings of learning and teacher practice have emerged that do not necessarily mesh well with the requirements of today's classrooms. There can become a disconnect between what a teacher believes to be best practice and what needs to be delivered in the classroom as it relates to the expectations of the diploma examination.

Emerging from our conversations came the feeling that the overall pedagogical impact of the diploma examination is that we "teach to the test" as is evidenced in the curricular reductionism, the melding of the Social Studies 30 program of studies with that of earlier secondary grades, and the paralleling of in-class assessment techniques with that of the diploma examination format. Accompanying this is the lure of adopting the efficient check-list approach to curriculum, ensuring that all examinable components of the program of studies are covered. This emphasis on testable material marginalizes the knowledge, skills and attitudes required in the course but which will not appear on the examination.

These approaches describe the common experience of the participants which may extend beyond this group of teachers to a larger segment of Social Studies 30 teachers in Alberta. Within the Social Studies 30 context, this seems to be an ineluctable reality. As participants reflected on this, a suggestion of reducing the weight of the test to a lower percentage of the students overall mark may ameliorate this effect. A suggestion of weighting of 30% - 40% would still motivate students to work towards excellent results but teachers would feel freer to align their pedagogy with a preferred teaching style rather than being limited to concentrating on preparation for the diploma examination.

Curricular impact

The arguments that the high-stakes examinations such as the diploma examination perpetuate a singular approach to knowledge dissemination and learning (Ross, 1999) and that external examinations shape teacher's beliefs and practices (Cornbleth, 2001) are reasonably supported by the participants' experience. Our conversations indicated that participants believed diploma examinations require them to be much more intentional in presenting the curricular material that may appear on the diploma examination. The concept of curricular reductionism (Neill, 1999; Myers, 1997a; Longstreet, 1996; Swanson, 1994) has become a reality for these teachers. Reducing the program of studies to testable elements marginalizes complex thinking and behaviours and the very nature of the examination with multiple-choice questions and an essay does not support full development of higher level thinking skills. The broad spectrum of skills found in the social studies curriculum are reduced to provide time to concentrate on the knowledge and skill objectives that will be tested. While some argue that the Alberta diploma examinations emphasize skill development and critical thinking (Runte, 1998), the participants' experiences indicate that, while this may be the intention, it is not always the case. A common experience among the participants was narrowing the content of the course to what was testable. Accompanying this limitation of focus was the minimalization of curricular and pedagogical approaches that were not aligned to the examinable curriculum. Transmission of knowledge becomes the method of instruction in most cases whether by default or intent.

The dominant discourse of conformity resulting from standardized assessment is experienced by all participants even though the reaction by each teacher is different. Bill was the most generous member of the group regarding the inclusion of appropriate social studies skills on the test. He believes that a variety of skills are developed and assessed meaningfully on the examination. Scott feels that, while the diploma examination adequately measures the knowledge and skills of the curriculum, it does not measure the full spectrum. Other participants' attitudes towards what the examination measures were not quite as accepting. Sarah and I felt that the knowledge component of the program of studies is emphasized at the expense of skills that are not easily testable and thus given scant attention in the classroom. This supports Myers (1997a) assertion that only what can be counted actually counts. Sarah feels the skills of critical and creative thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving are addressed by the examination but largely through the essay component. As all the participants concluded, the emphasis on these skills must be made in the Social Studies 10 and 20 curricula if they are to be fully developed since they are not emphasized as much in the 30 class due to the diploma examination. Mike's observation that the question that guides his teaching in Social Studies 30 is not "what are the important knowledge, skills and attitude objectives that should be emphasized?" but rather "what is going to be asked on the test and what are the students going to need to know?" (Conversation 3, 12/8/2004).

Another way curricular reduction occurs is through an emphasis on the textbooks. Mike believes that the curriculum becomes a mirrored image of the textbook. My experience certainly supports this reality. Sarah indicates that she uses the textbook to a much greater extent than in other classes and Scott ensures the textbook is an integral part of the program, more than in other classes. The diploma examination has effectively transformed the prescribed textbooks into the de facto curriculum for these teachers. While this result may not have been the intention of the diploma examination developers, it appears that within these classrooms the textbook has become the enacted curriculum.

A corollary concern of curricular reductionism is curricular creep. The notion that, to fully prepare the students for the diploma examination, a teacher must consciously integrate appropriate knowledge and skills that are required on the examination into the prerequisite courses of Social Studies 30. Thus, the transferral of those curricular elements to an earlier course which provides students with the opportunity to develop these skills appears to be common practice. All the participants indicated that there is an intentional integration of curriculum throughout the three secondary years with the purpose of preparing students for the diploma examination. This is either achieved through school departmental directive or by individual teachers who teach all three courses. The misfortune that results from this procedure is that some of the curricular demands of the earlier courses get marginalized or totally displaced because of the introduction of Social Studies 30 curricular expectations into those courses.

Our conversations also revolved around responsible citizenship, the ultimate goal of social studies in Alberta (Alberta Learning, 2000). There is a wide range of opinion on the effectiveness of the examination to adequately measure these skills. Bill feels that the diploma examination demands a solid foundation of knowledge, which is also required for citizenship. Along with this, a variety of skills are measured which are both required for the examination and which serve students well throughout their life. Scott believes that some skills are emphasized on the examination but that these skills do not represent a full complement of skills and abilities society may expect of a grade 12 student ready to take his or her place in society. He notes that it is possible to exit the final required social studies program without the requisite skills to be an active and responsible citizen, which is the goal of the program. Mike does not believe that citizenship is developed in the Social Studies 30 course to the extent that it should be, but rather that citizenship skills are largely marginalized due to the emphasis on the knowledge base required for the examination. This overarching goal of social studies could be realized if a component of the assessment could be designed to better reflect the knowledge, skills and attitudes of a responsible citizen. The format of the examination would have to change to more clearly reflect the goals of responsible citizenry but the fortunate result may be lessening the focus on those components tested on the diploma examination and a re-focusing on broad range of skills expected of and employed by responsible citizens.

Organization of Social Studies 30

As noted in each participant's narrative chapters, the organization of Social Studies 30 is affected in some way due to the presence of the diploma examination requirement. The reduction or elimination of locally-developed curricula and individually-crafted pedagogy (Nelson, Palonsky & McCarthy, 2004) is a reality in the participants' classrooms. The individual pedagogical and curricular decision-making component in any course is the prerogative of teachers. While the program of studies does provide the prescribed curricular guideline for each course, the teacher interprets this through his or her own teaching identity and preferred styles and methods of instruction. The presence of the diploma examination tends to purloin teacher opportunity and effectiveness in making these decisions. Our conversations revealed that all of us adhere much closer to the program of studies and textbook than in other courses we teach which greatly reduces, if not eliminates, the opportunities of an individualized interpretation of curricular and pedagogical strategies.

Stodolsky's (1998) view that the school curriculum is reduced to instruction that matches the content of the standardized tests is a reality in our experiences as we teach the Social Studies 30 course. Along with this impact, each participant has a personalized (re)organization of the course to prepare students for the diploma examination. Sarah emphasizes the use of outside sources to help develop appropriate case-studies, reduces discussion of relevant current events to a cursory level and experiences a heightened sensitivity to any information that may strengthen her program. Bill preoccupies himself with being on a schedule and devotes extra attention and energy to ensure this chronology is adhered to throughout the semester. Both also indicated that pacing of the course is much more rigorous, although the primary factor leading to this is not the expectations of the diploma examination as much as the volume of material that must be covered. Mike, Scott and I intentionally enlarged the scope of our Social Studies 30 courses to integrate curricular skills, vocabulary and knowledge into the entire secondary social studies program. The goal of studies moves away from that of developing responsible citizens to preparing students to perform well on the diploma examination. It is evident that the organization of Social Studies 30 is impacted more than any of our other classes due to the presence of the examination.

Surprises

As with any research project, surprises emerge that have significant import on the findings of the research. One surprise came from Mike's description of his Humanities 30 class and how a different pedagogical method can produce as effective student results as the traditional course and still be aligned with preferred teaching practices. While Mike suggested that it may be due to being an all-year course as well as reflecting the learning styles of the students who choose to take it in this format, it certainly is intriguing to note that exemplary results can be achieved through different methods of teaching.

As I entered the conversations with the participants, my expectations of findings were certainly different in regard to attitude towards the diploma examination. From earlier informal discussions with other Social Studies 30 teachers in different contexts, my impression was that the diploma examination was viewed as a reviled discourse of domination which negatively impacts teacher practice. This viewpoint was certainly a disconnect with my own experience and attitude towards the diploma examination program. My experience of preparing students was a positive one. In fact, during these discussions, I would normally listen and not express my viewpoints because I thought I must be the only one that felt this way. I believed that my pedagogical practices were not unduly harmed and the standardized curriculum and assessment was an important tool to ensure a superior level of education.

It seemed to me that I was an anomaly in the group of Social Studies 30 teaching professionals. Throughout the research conversations, I was repeatedly amazed at the other participants' attitudes. While not completely parallel to mine, they all accepted the diploma examination in the Social Studies 30 course and viewed it as an integral part of the program. There was no interest in abolishing it, even though we realized it impacted our teaching identities and preferred practices to a significant level. While each teacher supported the examination, each had ideas how to make it a better experience for both students and teachers. Out of our final focus group conversation came some suggestions which I believe are worthy of consideration.

Suggestions

As mentioned above, there was general consensus that the weighting of the examination should be reduced to a level, such as 30-40% where the high-stake pressures would be reduced for both the students and the teachers, allowing for more individual curricular and pedagogical approaches. Another suggestion revolved around the volume of curricular material necessary for the diploma examination. Some felt that it was almost as if we were teaching two full courses crammed into one. A reduction of curricular material would allow for a thorough examination of the concepts and provide more time to explore curricular themes that aligned with student and teacher interests. While the recognition of field-testing the diploma examination questions is seen as important, the time lag between the creation of the questions and the actual administration of them prevents questions on the multiple-choice section to deal with current events that would have been discussed throughout the semester. Even if the few questions dealing with current events were added without full field-testing, it would reflect the current affairs information that students were familiar with.

There were suggestions for a change to the assessment structure that would still allow for a diploma examination in Social Studies 30 but would also include elements which would reflect an evaluation of a broader range of skills and attitudes. Student portfolios could be required and reviewed by a panel of teachers similar to what is being done for the essay component. This would allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of higher-order thinking skills and attitudes that may be marginalized under the current structure of assessment.

Other suggestions included evaluating student oral presentations or projects that reflect the students' knowledge but also provide an alternative and broadened assessment structure since not all students' learning styles are reflected in a multiple-choice/essay format of evaluation. Another suggestion was that a volunteering component be added to the program of studies which may better reflect a student's recognition and acceptance of responsible citizenship as he or she enters society as a fully-contributing member. A final suggestion was to allow fully-accredited teachers to prepare their own final examination which would more fully reflect what happens in the individual classrooms in the province and provide a more accurate assessment of the full scope of knowledge, skills and attitudes as interpreted by each individual teacher.

Concluding thoughts

As I began the research process of discovering how other rural Alberta teachers' experience the high-stakes environment of the Social Studies 30 class due to the diploma examination and how it impacted our pedagogy I believed a fuller understanding was available through the hermeneutic approach to qualitative research. This methodology would allow me to immerse my own experiences, beliefs and practices and prejudices (Gadamer, 1975) into the research and allow for a comparison with others' experience in the same context. Self-understanding was as much a goal as understanding of others' experiences. Hermeneutics constant and renewable process involving an interpretation of the world and a movement out toward possibilities that are made one's own allowed me to recognized that learning about teaching is not something separate from learning about one's own self (Smits, 2001b).

In this quest, I also recognized that there would be no final answers. Meaning emerged from our conversations over time, ambiguous and never complete. What I discovered were the lived experiences of social studies teachers who faced the similar challenges to what I faced in the classroom. To appreciate and achieve Gallagher's (1992) concept of interpretation, I believe I developed original insights which give meaning and understanding regarding what it means to be a Social Studies 30 teacher and how one negotiates his or her pedagogical path within the context of high-stakes testing.

The hermeneutic circle conceptualized in this study has allowed me to understand the whole of the experience of high-stakes testing in social studies as I explore the parts of each person's experience, the stresses we face, the pedagogical and curricular impact and affects on our teaching identity. In turn, the understanding of these parts more fully aid in understanding the whole of the experience. Gadamer's (1975) fusion of horizons allowed each of the participant's experiences and attitudes to intersect which provided a new understanding of our role as teachers in this environment. Smith's mutually affecting entities (1991) were realized as we dwelt in and reflected on the lived world of curricular expectations and pedagogical realities. We listened; we heard; and thus mutually affected each other's individual lived experiences. Conversational research (Carson, 1984; Feldman, 1999) has allowed us to develop a deeper understanding of the reality of our situations as educators.

In reviewing the study, it is evident that the individual narratives of Sarah, Bill, Scott, and Mike merged with my own story and resulted in co-created meanings which enabled each of us to more fully understand what it means to be a teacher in the Social Studies 30 diploma examination context. This ontological turn has provided an understanding of how our being is affected by the requirements and restrictions of the examination. The intent of the research was to develop an understanding of these strictures on our lives but, in a sense, to also share these with other Social Studies 30 teachers and let them develop understandings in relation to their own experiences as Jalongo and Isenberg (1995) believe takes place in the sharing of narratives.

In reflecting on the conversations, all the participants, including me, saw significant value in creating a space for critical reflection. Increasingly, teachers' lives are taken up with the contingencies and urgencies of day-to-day teaching and it is difficult to initiate a time and place for reflection. Professional reflection is vital, as demonstrated through several participants' personal reflective practices. Reflection and professional development can be further enhanced by involving colleagues in hermeneutical conversations relating to practice. For this to happen, school and district administration must provide adequate time for this to occur. It is not enough to encourage this practice, but time and space is also required, and must be provided, for this to be effective.

As teachers take the opportunity to reflect on what it means for them to teach in a high-stakes environment and how their teaching identities are affected by an externally-mandated examination, a clearer self-understanding will emerge. Accompanying this self-realization is the potential to have teachers' voices heard regarding their own experience in the high-stakes environment and its impact on pedagogical as well as curricular choices. Through these conversations, both the value of understanding one's own teaching identity, as well as the importance of making public statements regarding teachers in a high-stakes environment will be realized. This realization will, in turn, develop the potential for meaningful change on a personal, school, district as well as provincial level.

By publicly sharing these narratives, we hope that those who are not teaching in this context, but who have vested interest in the well-being of students and teachers, will be informed by the study and develop an understanding of the impact of the diploma examination on social studies teachers. With this study as a foundation, decisions made regarding the diploma examination in Social Studies 30 will hopefully enhance the program as well as support exemplary pedagogical practice, ameliorate stresses and pressures teachers experience and enable the full spectrum of social studies knowledge, skills and attitudes to be more completely taught and assessed.

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Appendix A

Possible questions relating to how a Social Studies 30 teacher experiences the high-stakes environment of the Diploma Examinations program.

How do you as a social studies teacher experience teaching a class in which an externally mandated examination is required for the students to write?

Do you feel pressures or stresses teaching a course in which a diploma examination is written by the students?

Is there a tension felt between the expectations of the examination and your own vision of how a course like this should be taught?

How do these externally imposed assessment instruments affect the way you teach your Socials 30 classes?

How do externally imposed assessment instruments affect your identity as a teacher?

Do you view the changes in teaching methods positive or negative?

Where do you see yourself on the spectrums of transmission of culture/knowledge vs. active participation and content vs. process?

Do you experience "test anxiety" believing that the results could be potentially be used against you?

How would you characterize your teaching experience in SS30?

a) relatively autonomous, independent, creative professional
b) mundane and mechanical purveyor of knowledge

Does this perception change in the non-diploma examination classes?

For whom does the teacher speak and teach?

a) mandated curriculum
b) the school
c) the profession
d) the students
e) the teacher

How have the examinations impacted the your lived reality in the classroom?

Have the test aided or hindered the teacher-student relationship i.e. do both see it as a common enemy or do the students hold it against the teacher?

Is having students do well viewed as an affirmation of your teaching abilities?

Are the results valuable to compare students, teachers, schools, districts?

Is it better to retain or abolish the examinations?

Do the examinations create undue stress for you?

Do you worry about the results being used against you?

How does the reporting of school marks affect you?

Have the results ever been misused against you? How?

How do you feel if the results are good and used to indicate good teaching practice?

Is it important to have a standardized curriculum and assessment structure in Alberta?

Do you feel that a teacher could possibly lose standards in teaching if there were no examinations?

Does the presence of an examination in SS30 elevate the status of this course compared to others that don't have that requirement?

Do the examinations help or hinder parent-teacher relations i.e. not as much pressure to change grades or results are used to confirm teacher marks?

Are the examinations more for political purposes or educational purposes?

Are the diploma examinations an adequate indicator of teacher ability?

Possible questions dealing with impact on teacher practice.

How does helping prepare students for the diploma examination impact teacher pedagogy?

Do you tailor your other social studies classes to allow for teaching skills required on the test? How?

What methods do you use in the Social Studies 30 class and are they different than the methods that you use in non-diploma examination classes?

How do you organize your Social Studies 30 class and is it any different than the non-diploma examination classes that you teach?

What curricular knowledge, skills and attitudes are emphasized in the diploma examination class and which ones are ignored?

Have social studies skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, creative thinking and the development of citizenship skills been emphasized or de-emphasized due to the diploma examination?

Do you feel that a teacher must "teach to the test" for the students to succeed?

Do you feel the demands of the test make you take preparation of the students more seriously?

Does a standardized assessment like this provide a more equitable experience for the students?

Are there areas of the curriculum that are minimalized because they are not easily tested?

Do you feel that the presence of these examinations hone teaching skills?

Do you feel that the presence of these examinations ensure the prescribed curriculum is being taught?

Do you feel that the presence of these examinations reduce a teacher's pedagogy?

Is construction of knowledge different in Social Studies 30 than in other social studies classes?

Do you organize your Social Studies 30 diploma examination course differently than other courses you teach in social studies?

What curricular skills and attitudes are emphasized and which are ignored due to the presence of the test?

How have the tests impacted your locally developed curricula and individually crafted pedagogy?

Have the demands of the tests impacted your SS 30 classes and differently in relation to:

a) choice of curricular content?
b) response to individual and collective student needs?
c) instructional pace?

How do your teaching practices and methods differ between a diploma examination course and a non-diploma examination course?

How do you perceive the changes in pedagogy? Positive or negative? Why?

What are some positive/negative impacts the examinations have had on your teaching?

Do you feel any parts of the curriculum are emphasized because of the examinations? De-emphasized?

Do you ever feel that your instruction is being de-railed as a result of the examinations? Enhanced?

Do you coach the students to do well on the examinations?

How important is it for you as a teacher to have the opportunity to be involved with the essay marking and/or item-building?

Do you see the essay marking and item-building as professional development activities?

Do multiple choice and essay formats provide an adequate form of assessment of the SS30 curriculum?

Do you agree with the statement, "Even though they aren't perfect, the diploma examinations are a necessary component of SS30?

Do you see the curriculum shaping the diploma examinations or the diploma examinations shaping the curriculum?

Do you use the results as a self-examination of your own teaching?

How have the diploma examinations affected your teaching methods?